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THE MAID OF KILLEENA

AND

OTHER STORIES.

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BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF "A PRINCESS OF THULE." &c., &c.

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THE MAID OF KILLEENA

AND OTHER TALES.

I.

THE MAID OF KILLEENA.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIVE BROTHERS OF DARROCH.

"FAIR and fine is the Maid of Killeena. Her foot is light on the heather as the foot of the roe-deer on Corrabhal; her eyes are bluer than the blue seas round Uig; when she speaks the valley rejoices. And she has no lover, the Maid of Killeena; her heart is as free as the winds of the morning; the young men are afraid of her laughing; they avoid the road to Killeena."

Such were the phrases, mere echoes of Macpherson's Ossian, that were running through the

head of a young lad who lay on the beach of the far and lonely island of Darroch, in the Hebrides. He was dressed in rough, dark-blue fisherman's costume; his hands and face were browned with the weather; but somehow he did not seem to have the robust and hardy look common to the inhabitants of that rough coast. His face was pensive and sad; his eyes large and thoughtful; his limbs appeared slender and supple rather than thickset and strong. At this moment he was regarding with an absent and indifferent look the sea before him, the islands that stood black in the pale colours of the water, and a large brown rowing-boat which was being pulled out through one of the channels to the open plain beyond. In that boat were his four brothers. He was to have gone out fishing with them as usual; but he had forgotten the time and missed them, and he had run down to this projecting point of the coast

to hail them as they went by. For a second or two they hung on their oars, and seemed inclined to pull in for him; but then he could see his eldest brother, Duncan, turn round and address his companions with many angry gestures; and presently the oars were dipped into the waves again, and the boat made out for the open sea. The young lad, Alister Lewis by name, lay down on the shingle, disappointed, ashamed, and wretched. His heart was not in the fishing, and everyone knew it; still it was hard that he should be left at home to mind the farm as if he were a girl or an old woman. But as he lay and dreamed of all these things, his fancy took him away to the neighbouring island of Killeena and to a small farmsteading there, where a mother and an only daughter lived. The daughter was Ailasa[1] Macdonald—the Maid of

[1] The name is pronounced Aïlăsă. Alister has also the accent on the first syllable.

Killeena the boy used to call her to himself —and his heart grew light in thinking of her. The picture he had before his imagination was really one to dwell with delight on; that of a young girl of sixteen, graceful in figure, with light-brown hair that, unloosed, would have rippled down to her feet, eyes brightly blue and shaded with dark eyelashes, and a disposition as merry, and bright, and innocent, as ever cheered up a rude home. And that was a rude home enough —the small farmhouse of Carn-Slean, which was set in the middle of a moor, with a few fields reclaimed from the black peat-moss all around, and with but a scanty show of sheep on the drier uplands abutting on the farm. She had no lover, this Maid of Killeena; but there was some one over the narrow channel that separated the island from Darroch who let his boyish fancies cluster around her in a tender and wistful fashion, keeping the secret, as he imagined, sacred to himself.

It was no secret, however, to his four brothers, the eldest of whom—a short, thick-set, hard-visaged man of fierce temper and passionate speech—was himself supposed to harbour some wish that he might in a year or two get this bright young lass to be his wife. Duncan Lewis spoke angrily of his younger brother's visits to the farm of Carn-Slean. He never had any great love for the lad, who was ill qualified for the rough work of the fishing; but sometimes he spoke of him with a sudden emphasis of hatred which startled the others. On this occasion, when young Alister Lewis came running down to the point, to hail the boat, the eldest brother had turned and said fiercely—

"We will not go in to the shore for him—no, by Kott, we will not go in to the shore. He is no use for the fishing, not more as if he wass a child; and he will look out for the storms with those teffles of eyes of his staring. Let

him go to the farm. Let him look after the hens and bring the cows home. We hef no more use for him in the boat!"

"But we hef got his fiddle with us," said another of the brothers regretfully; "and he is ferry goot with the songs and the stories."

"The songs and the stories!" said Duncan Lewis, with an oath. "Who will want to hef stories that will mek the ferry dead rise up in their graves? They are not goot songs for the middle of the night. His songs and his stories! —Let him tek them over to that lass at Killeena —she will hef his songs and his stories!"

"But it is you, Duncan Lewis, yourself," retorted the brother, "who would like to hef a word with Mrs. Macdonald's lass."

The eldest brother did not answer; he struck his oar into the water, the other oars instantly following; and then the measured throb could have been heard along the shores of these lonely

islands, while a gloomy silence prevailed on board the boat.

Meanwhile, Alister Lewis had got up to his feet, showing himself a tall and well-made stripling enough, though he had not the stalwart make of his brothers.

"I will go over to Killeena," he said to himself. "I hef something to say to Ailasa."

He walked along the shores of the island—the shingly beach of which soon gave way to stretches of fine wind-swept sand. He came to a narrow channel, on the other side of which was another island—darker and more rocky than Darroch; while the strait between had clearly a strong current running through it. How to get over? There was not even a house within sight on these desolate shores. The lad coolly undressed himself, tied his clothes in a bundle and strapped them on his shoulders, then he made his way carefully into the water, and swam

the channel. The water was pretty smooth; but all the same the lower part of the bundle was considerably wet. Not heeding that much —indeed, he had calculated on it—he rapidly dressed himself again; and began walking smartly up and over the marshy green wastes of Killeena, until he reached a small farm set amid the black moorlands that had been cut for peat. An elderly woman was at the door, in the misty sunlight, spinning wool. One or two people—mostly old men, who had given up the fishing, but who still wore fishermen's clothes—were at work in the fields. There was no sign of the young Maid of Killeena.

"Yes, is it you, Alister Lewis?" Mrs. Macdonald said, in the Gaelic; "and have you not brought your fiddle to give us a tune? And are your brothers not gone to the fishing to-day?"

"My brothers have gone to the fishing without

me," said Alister, in the same tongue, "and they have taken my fiddle with them. I want to see your Ailasa, Mrs. Macdonald, for I am going away."

"You are going away, Alister Lewis! And where are you going?" she said.

"I am going to Glasgow—yes, that is where I am going. I am not any use at the fishing; and my mother and father they do not want me at the farm. It is a long way the way to Glasgow."

"You will find Ailasa in the kitchen," said Mrs. Macdonald.

Ailasa was raking up the peats—the fire was in the middle of the floor, with a chimney overhead going up through the thatch of the roof—with the intention of putting a big pot on the iron hook. She turned round suddenly as he entered—a bright look of surprise and gladness flashed into her face—and she said in English, "And

iss it you, Alister, at last? You hef not been here not for more as two weeks."

"No, I hef not, Ailasa," he said, casting down his eyes; "and now I wass come to bid you good-bye, for it iss to Glasgow that I am going. It iss no use my being here any more; and if I can get any work in Glasgow, that will be ferry well indeed; and if I can go to the schools there I will do that, too, for it iss not any great money you want to go to the college there, as Malcolm Ross he wass telling to me when I will see him in Stornoway, and so—and so, Ailasa, I wass wanting to say good-bye to you before I go."

"But you will not be for going to Glasgow all at once, Alister?" said the girl, with two big tears appearing in her eyes.

"It iss no use spending the time any more here," the lad said wistfully. "I would write you a letter, Ailasa, from Glasgow, if you would

like that, and if you would send me the news, that would be a ferry good day the day that I got a letter from you with all the news in it."

"And are you going away like that, Alister Lewis?" she said; "and none of your friends to come and drink a glass to your good health, and not a word to any one of them? And it is only in half-an-hour that we will hef dinner, Alister; and what is half-an-hour if you are going away to Glasgow?"

"But you will not be ferry angry with me, Ailasa," he said, rather shamefacedly, "bekass it is a hard thing to go away, and I will not hef the spirit to say good-bye to them all—only to you, Ailasa, and to your mother; and so good-bye to you, Ailasa, and it will be a ferry good day for me that day that you will send me a letter to Glasgow."

Ailasa was now crying bitterly. She held

out her hand; and he, unable to speak, shook it warmly, and went away. Then, with some broken sentences in Gaelic, he bade good-bye to the old mother, and betook himself again to crossing the wild moorland on his way to the sea.

That night the brothers, who had only been out with the lines, came home late and rather dispirited. The take had been small. When in due course they sat down to supper, the old father and mother included, Alister only was absent.

"I suppose he hass been all the day over with that lass at Carn-Slean," said the black-haired Duncan, angrily. "He is better there than at the fishing. He will go to the fishing with us no more—by Kott, he will go with us no more."

"You are right, Duncan Lewis, and it is a hard man you are," the old mother said, beginning

to cry. "He will not go to the fishing with you, not any more, for the boy is going to Glasgow."

"And a ferry good thing too and mirover," said Duncan, gloomily, "he will be ferry much better in a counting-house than at an oar; and he will hef his fiddle when he likes, and his stories, and his books. 'Tiss a ferry good thing that he will be going away to Glasgow."

"By Kott," exclaimed one of the other brothers with a sudden vehemence, "if Alister iss going for to go to Glasgow, it iss not with empty pockets that he will go to Glasgow!"

"No, no!" cried the other brothers. "We will gif the lad something to put in his pocket! By Kott, he will hef something to put in his pocket!"

And here the white-haired old father interfered; and with many wise shakes of the head he intimated that he knew all that lay before a young

man who was going to seek his fortune in a strange and distant city. Old Hector Lewis, to be sure, had never been out of the Hebrides, and had never seen any greater or more glorious city than Stornoway; but he was supposed to know much more than most men of what was going on in the world. Alister would soon get a situation. He could be recommended to Mr. Macilwham, the painter and glazier, of the Gallowgate; and though it was too late to apprentice him to that trade, Mr. Macilwham would surely be able to find an occupation for a young man who was learned in all matters of book-craft, handwriting, figuring, and the like.

"I wass thinking he will not get much money for the writing of verses of poetry—that is a ferry bad trade," said Duncan Lewis with some contempt.

"But this is what I say," said Nicol Lewis, the third brother, with unnecessary warmth, "I

say there iss not any finer lad in the Western Isles as Alister Lewis, and it will surely be a shame, and a great shame, if we wass to let him fight his own way in a strange town. And this is what I say, that if effery penny of my money that is in the bank of Stornoway will hef to go, if effery farthing and penny will hef to go, Alister he will be at the college, as sure as I am a living man, by Kott!"

And there and then the three brothers settled it, Duncan being the only dissentient. When Alister came in to supper he was pale and silent. He felt himself an outcast; and that his brothers had reason to despise him for that he could not work in the boat as they did. He was conscious that he spent his time in idling about the moors and solitudes—in playing his rude violin by the side of lonely streams—in reading books and studying algebraic puzzles that could be of no use to any one. So he came in and sate

down at the plain wooden table, silent and ashamed.

"And where hef you been this day, Alister?" said Nicol Lewis.

The lad bit his lip and was silent; he did not wish to be laughed at.

"At Carn-Slean—that iss where he wass," said Duncan Lewis, looking dark.

"That iss true," the lad said at last. "I wass over at Carn-Slean—it wass to say good-bye. For I am going to Glasgow—it iss no use my being here any more."

"That is a true word you hef spoken, Alister Lewis," said his brother Nicol, in a kindly fashion; "and we are ferry glad you would think of going to Glasgow, bekass it is not many hass such skill o' reading and writing as you; and it wass Donald, and Hamish, and me, we wass sayin' there iss no great expense of the going to the college, and we wass saying that the expense—well, we

will tek the expense, and it iss no great thing that we will tek the expense. And if you get a place in Glasgow that will keep you in your meat and your clothes, that wass ferry well whatever; but the college, it iss Donald, and Hamish, and me, we will pay for the college, and you will send us the letter, Alister, that will tell us all the news."

Surely the boy was not fit for the hard life of a fisherman—for at this moment, when he ought to have been glad of heart, any one could have seen that tears were running down his face. He rose abruptly from the table. He went to the small window—a single pane of glass let into the wall—and stood there for a moment or two. Then he came back, and held out his hand to each of the three brothers in succession.

"It iss a ferry kind man you are, Nicol Lewis," he said to the last of them, "and a ferry good brother to me. And it iss not much of your

money I will spend at the college; and when I can I will pay you back your money; but there iss more than the money that I thank you for this night, Nicol Lewis."

And so, some few days thereafter, Alister Lewis sailed in the steamer for Glasgow; and many thought they should see him no more in this world, considering that he had gone away to that distant place; but as for Ailasa Macdonald she had no such thoughts, and used, on the contrary, to sit of an evening and wonder what the great city was like; and wonder, too, when Alister Lewis would grow to be a great and famous man and come back in pride and honour to the humble farm in the island of Darroch.

CHAPTER II.

NEWS FROM FAR AWAY.

THREE months went by before they got a letter. It was on the evening of a warm autumn day that Ailasa saw the solitary figure of the postman come over the level moors; and in the distance—in the midst of the glow of rich colour that was shining over all the land and the sea—that humble official seemed to her to come like an angel out of a cloud of golden mist. She knew the letter had come at last. Fleet-footed as a young roe she ran to meet him, and she was too breathless to ask him the necessary question when she was face to face with him.

"Oh, ay," the shrivelled old man said, opening his bag; "it wass more as four times or six times you hef come out to meet me, Ailasa, and you wass thinking I had a letter from Alister Lewis that is away in Glasgow. And this time you hef come the right time; and there is more as a letter for you, there is a gran' big book, a ferry fine big book, and you will be ferry proud of it whatever. I hef not seen any such fine book since the wan that Sheila Mackenzie sent all the way from Borvabost to Mrs. M'Gregor's lad when he wass ferry ill wi' the fever."

"And if you would give me the book and the letter, John Cameron," said Ailasa, rather impatiently, "you could go on to the house and hef a dram."

So she got the letter and the book, and forthwith she sat down on the heather, leaving the postman to go on his way. It was a well-written

letter—Alister Lewis had always been clever with his pen.

"Dear Ailasa," so it ran, "you will be expecting all the news from me this long time; but I would not send the news till I had the good news to send you. And now I can do that; for I have got a good master, and a good master makes a willing servant, and he is very kind to me whatever. And I have been very busy with the night classes since I was come to Glasgow; and I have been three nights in the week for my Latin to an old gentleman that I have heard was a Catholic priest many years ago, and he has classes for the young men that are going to college, and they are all very eager to go to the college. The Greek is at eight in the morning; and it is very much easier for me to learn here than in Darroch, where there was no one to tell you if you were right. My teacher thinks that I will pass the examination; and the junior

Latin at the college it is early in the morning, and my master says he will give me what hours I will want for my classes. Dear Ailasa, I have spent not one farthing of the money that Nicol, and Hamish, and Donald they gave to me, no not any one farthing of the money; and I am in hopes to keep myself at the college. It is a terrible place this big town—you cannot sleep for weeks after coming to it; and it is very lonely you are. But I am very busy all the day, and have not much time to think of anything but the work of the day and my books at night; and when I have a little time I go down to the river where the ships are, and I hear a little Gaelic among the sailors, and I see the big steamers going away for Oban, and Islay, and Stornoway, and then I think of all the people I know in Killeena and Darroch, and if I shall see them any more. That is all the news. If you would send me a letter with the news, that would be a great pleasure to

me. I was thinking I would like to send you a book if you will take it from me; but if you do not wish to take the book from me you will tell me about that in the letter with all the news. And I hope your mother is very well; and I remain, dear Ailasa, your faithful friend, Alister Lewis."

The young girl did not look at the book. She read and re-read the letter, and her face was full of pride and gladness. Had he not prospered famously in the far city, where they had already so far recognised the erudition he had picked up in Darroch that they were going to admit him to the great University? And he had maintained himself, keeping himself free from debt, and he a mere stripling. Ailasa drew a wonderful picture for herself of the young man's triumphant circumstances and prospects. She did not know of the dingy little room in the attics; of the breakfast, dinner, and supper of oatmeal porridge; of

the weary hours of study stretching far into the night, and of the slow drudgery of the day in that shop in the Gallowgate.

Surely this evening was to be one full of wonders. Another figure appeared as if coming out of the sunset; what new stranger was this? A short, stout-built, dark-haired man came across the rough moorland, and approached Ailasa in a somewhat shy fashion.

"I hope you are ferry well, Ailasa," said he, holding out his hand in an embarrassed way.

"Yes, I am ferry well whatever, Duncan Lewis," said she without any great concern. "And you will be for seeing my mother. She is in the house."

"I might hef come to see yourself, Ailasa," said he.

The young girl laughed lightly.

"To come all the way from Darroch to see me? That would be ferry kind of you, Duncan,

if I could believe it. But my mother wass saying it will be a long time since we hef seen any of the Darroch people, and she will be ferry glad to see you this day—oh, yes, she will be ferry glad to see you."

The fisherman stood embarrassed and uncertain. He would like to have said something more; but he had been regarding the open letter and the gilt-edged book lying on her lap, and angry suspicions were crowding in on his mind. So he suddenly left her, and went on to the house, where he found Mrs. Macdonald stirring up the peat-fire. She rapidly dusted a stool for him, and bade him sit down.

"It is a ferry fine evening, this evening," said he.

"Indeed it is, praise God," she said, in the Gaelic; and thereafter they spoke in that tongue.

"It is a strange thing I am come to you

about this day," said he, with his eyes on the ground. "I am the eldest one of my family. I have done well in the world, Mrs. Macdonald. I have more than 120*l.* in the bank at Stornoway."

"That is a good thing, Duncan Lewis," she answered. "You have kept off the drink like a prudent man. It is not every one has so much money in the bank at Stornoway."

"And it is time, Mrs. Macdonald," he continued, "that one of our family should take a wife; and the eldest first, according to the old saying."

"Yes, indeed, the eldest first," she said, producing a bottle, a glass, and a plate with some pieces of oatmeal cake on it.

"And this is it, Mrs. Macdonald; there is no lass in all the islands so good and fine a lass as your Ailasa, Mrs. Macdonald, and if she will take me for a husband it is a good husband

I will be to her; and I will come to Carn-Slean when there is no fishing and look after the farm for you, for you want a man to look after the farm at the time of the sowing and at the time of the harvest."

The Highlandwoman received this proposal in a calm and matter-of-fact way.

"Take a glass of whisky, Duncan Lewis, and drink to our good health—I do not touch the whisky myself. As for our Ailasa, she will be married some day, I hope, for that is good and right for a lass, and I hope she will have an honest husband who knows how to keep off the drink like yourself, Duncan. But she is too young a lass to think of taking a husband yet. If she waits five or six years then it will be a good time to take a husband."

"That is fairly spoken," said the fisherman. "I will wait five or six years if Ailasa will promise to be my wife. I am not in a hurry,

Mrs. Macdonald; but it is a good thing to know you have made your choice, instead of going to all places to look for a wife."

"Then you can speak to herself, Duncan Lewis; and here she comes," said the mother. "And do not forget to say that you will come and look after the farm when you have not to go to the fishing."

Ailasa came in, bearing her two treasures in her hand; and surely a brighter or prettier lass than this comely young creature could not have been found anywhere in these remote islands.

"Do you know I hef a letter from Alister Lewis?" she said to her mother, "and a fine book, too, that is full of the pictures of flowers. And it iss a ferry good letter of news, for he is going to the college, just like Malcolm Ross."

"Oh, ay," his eldest brother said, with an angry look gathering on his face, "it is ferry

fine for him to go and be a gentleman with all the money that Hamish and Nicol gif to him as if he wass no more nor a beggar's son, and it iss ferry fine for him to live on their money and go to the College."

"But it is a mistake and a ferry great mistake that you hef made, Duncan Lewis," said Ailasa, very warmly. "It is no beggar's son that Alister is, for he has not touched a farthing of the money; and if he had, it wass only a loan that he could give them back again; but he hass not spent no not one farthing of the money, and he iss no more a beggar's son as you are yourself, Duncan Lewis!"

"I am not a beggar's son," said the dark-haired fisherman, his temper getting the better of his prudence. "It is more as 120*l.* I hef in the bank at Stornoway; and when will he make that at the College?"

"He will make that and a great deal very

much more than that before a few years is over," said the girl confidently; "and it is not money that is everything."

"Well, it is not right for us to hef a quarrel, Ailasa Macdonald," said Duncan Lewis, gloomily. "I did not come here to hef a quarrel. I wass saying to your mother that a man who hass money to tek a farm of his own should think of marrying; and I hef told you what money it is that is mine in the bank at Stornoway; and I wass saying I would come and look after the farm at Carn-Slean when there wass no fishing——"

"That is ferry good of you, Duncan Lewis," said Ailasa, with some surprise; he was not ordinarily generous.

"But this is it, Ailasa," said he; "you are a young thing, and hef no one to tek care of you if your mother wass ill. And I wass saying —I wass saying to your mother—that I would

like to hef you for my wife, in five years, or four years, as might be, and that is the word I wass wishing to speak to you, Ailasa Macdonald."

The girl looked more and more astonished, and then turned, as if for guidance, to her mother. Mrs. Macdonald had begun to peel some potatoes for supper, and was apparently not listening.

"To be your wife, Duncan Lewis? And it iss not any joke that you are making?"

"It iss not any joke at all," said he.

"Then I cannot gif you my word back, Duncan Lewis," she said simply. "Not in five years, or in four years—it iss no use your thinking of it all that time—you will get some other lass in Darroch."

The man rose with a gloomy look about the dark eyes.

"That iss your answer to me, Ailasa Macdonald; and it iss the last word you hef for me?"

"Yes, it iss the last, Duncan Lewis," she said; "but it iss ferry good friends that we may be although I cannot think of marrying you."

He did not make any answer to that proposal. He bade mother and daughter good-bye in a brief word or two in Gaelic; and then he set out to cross the Killeena moors. The shadows of night were gathering over the islands and the sea when he entered his own home; but their blackness was not half so forbidding and ominous as the fixed and ang. scowl on his face.

CHAPTER III.

AILASA'S PROMISE.

FROM time to time, at considerable intervals, news came of the young man in Glasgow, and it was good news. He was getting on well at college; his master was in every way considerate; he was ready to help him to some sort of work better suited for him. But at the end of each of those letters which Ailasa read aloud to her mother, the girl said to herself, "And why does he not come back to see his old friends?"

One day there was a great commotion in Darroch and Killeena. It was known that

young Alister Lewis, who had been to the college, and was likely to become a school-master, was returning for a few days to the place of his birth. And Ailasa went down to the sea, and herself pulled across the narrow strait, and walked to the farm in Darroch to see if this was all true. True, indeed, it was; for there was Alister Lewis himself coming to meet her.

While he was yet at a distance her heart grew cold within her. He was no longer the fisher-boy, in his rough and homely clothes, that had played about the shore with her, and got her the sea-birds' eggs. He was a young man now; he was smartly dressed; he seemed a stranger.

"Ailasa!" he cried, as he came near; "and are you very well? And I was coming over to Carn-Slean at this very moment!"

Somehow she could not speak. She turned aside her head, and began to cry silently.

"Ailasa," said he, "what is the matter?"

"This is the matter, Alister Lewis," she said, simply, between her sobs; "it is another way you speak now, since you hef been to Glasgow; and I wass thinking it was no longer yourself that I saw, but a stranger; and you hef come back to Darroch like a stranger, and you will speak no more like us, and you wass be for growing ashamed of the people that wass your friends long ago."

"It is a bad welcome you will give me this day, Ailasa," said he, sadly; "and it is hard words that you hef spoken."

They stood silent for a minute or two—silent and embarrassed. Then he said—

"Were you going on to the farm, Ailasa?"

"I was coming only to see if the news wass true; and now I am going back to Carn-Slean."

"I will row you across the water," said he;

and then the two walked down to the shore of the island.

He pulled her across the narrow channel, and moored the boat in the little creek.

"I can swim back," said he, with a smile, "if I have not forgotten the way of the swimming."

"And you will not come over to Carn-Slean and see my mother?" the girl said timidly. "It is many the night we will hef spoken about you; and when I wass writing a letter to you, she would always say, '*Now you will put the good English into your letter, Ailasa, for Alister Lewis, he will be a great scholar now and he will be learning the good English.*' I did not know when I was writing to you, Alister, that—that——"

"That there was any change in me?" the young man said, indignantly. "Well, there is no change in me, but if there is any change it is you that are changed, Ailasa Macdonald,

that you have forgotten your old friends. And maybe there are new friends," he added, with a sudden wild suspicion, "for a young lass has many to look after her."

The girl blushed rose-red.

"I hef no friends that I had not when you went away to Glasgow, Alister Lewis," she said, with her eyes cast down. "Who is it that would be for coming to Killeena? It is a very lonely life that we are living at Killeena."

"Yes, indeed," said he; "and many was the night in Glasgow that I was thinking of you and of the farm, and of the hard life in the winter-time. But then, I was saying to myself, that will not be always. There will be coming the young man from Uig, or from Harris, who will marry her, and he will take her away from the lonely life in Killeena, and maybe he will take her up to Stornoway, and give her a fine house there."

"Then you wass ferry much mistaken, Alister

Lewis," she said, with some asperity. "There is not any young man coming from Uig, or Harris, or Styornoway, to do any such thing. And you would better hef been with your books than thinking such nonsense!"

"But a young lass must marry, Ailasa," he said.

"There iss no need for that—there iss no need whateffer," she said, proudly.

"Because, Ailasa, this was what I was thinking," he said, with the handsome, fine face and dark eyes turned timidly as well as sadly towards her, "this was what I was thinking many a day and many a night since I went away from Darroch, that if there was none of the young men coming about to marry you, Ailasa, if there was no one at all that you were thinking of, that I would ask you, Ailasa, to be my wife some day, when I had some money gathered together, and wass ready to give you a house."

"And this is what I will say to you, Alister

Lewis," she said, turning round to confront him, and yet with her eyes cast down and her face pale, "that if ever I marry any young man, it will be you yourself that I will marry, and no other one—that is what I hef said to myself. But I do not think I will ever marry you, Alister Lewis; bekass when you hef money and you hef become a rich man, you will not think of a poor lass that wass living in Killeena, and that is what I expect, and I will not be angry with you when you will not marry a lass that will bring shame on you bekass she hass not got fine clothes and does not know the good English."

"Ailasa, it is a bargain that you have made between us two this day," said he, paying no heed to her depreciation of herself.

And so they drew near to Carn-Slean, and they walked hand-in-hand, as they had often done in their childhood. They spoke little, but there was a proud and confident look on the young

man's face. Mrs. Macdonald was warned of their coming by the sudden scampering off of a collie to meet them, and when she came out, she poured out in rapid Gaelic her praises of the alteration in Alister Lewis's appearance and would have him drink a glass of whisky in his own honour. The young man refused that friendly offer; but he sat down on one of the big stones by the door; and proceeded to tell Ailasa's mother, with an occasional stammer in his Gaelic, of all his adventures in Glasgow. She was greatly disappointed that he had not seen the Duke of Argyll, nor yet Sir James Matheson; but when he told her that his master knew the Lord Provost of Glasgow and several of the baillies and town councillors she regarded the young man with something of awe, and then, with the shrewdness of age, hoped that he would reap some practical advantage from even the remotest relations with those great people.

Then he rose to take his leave, after having eaten a piece of oatcake and drunk a glass of milk.

"You will take the boat over the water, Alister Lewis," said Mrs. Macdonald. "And John Cameron he will bring it back in the morning."

"It is no use the trouble," said Alister, "it is many the time I have swam across."

"And with all your fine Glasgow clothes on?" said the mother, indignantly. "That is indeed nonsense."

"Ferry well then, mother," said Ailasa, who seldom followed them into the Gaelic, "it is no quarrel there will be about the crossing, for I will go down and tek Alister across, and bring back the boat."

The young man was in no hurry to protest against her taking all this trouble. On the contrary he accepted her offer eagerly; and the mother thought him a prudent lad to think of his clothes.

"Ailasa," said he, as they walked across the moor in the twilight, "you will never forget that it is a promise you hef given to me this day."

"I will never forget that, Alister Lewis," she said, simply. "But if you forget it, that will be no shame to you, for it iss not everyone that would come back from Glasgow to marry a poor lass in Killeena."

"A poor lass!" said he. "There is no such lass anywhere—not one in Glasgow, Ailasa, fit to wear your shoes. And you have grown half a woman since I left Darroch—in a year or two, if you will wait so long, you will be the handsomest bride that has ever gone to a wedding in all the Western Islands. And it is nonsense you speak about my becoming a rich man; it is far less you can make with all the college learning than at the fishing. It is a poor man you will marry, Ailasa Macdonald, and that is the truth."

"And there iss no fear for me in that," said the girl, "not if you wass as poor as old Sandy McKillop since they hef taken away his pipes."

He pulled the boat across the channel, and then surrendered the oars to her. It was nearly dark—the ripples that plashed against the boat struck white stars of fire—there was a strange glow over the northern heavens.

"Good-night to you, Alister Lewis," she said; "and you will come over to-morrow to tell us more of the news."

"Good-night to you, Ailasa Macdonald," said he, holding her hand; "and you will never forget the promise that you have made to me this day."

CHAPTER IV.

SOME FESTIVITIES.

So the time went by, and Ailasa Macdonald marked it no longer by the recurrent seasons, nor yet by the going away of the men to the Caithness fishery, but by the letters she got from Alister Lewis in Glasgow. And each of these was more confident and buoyant than its predecessor; for the young man got on well at the University, and his master took a great interest in him, and some of the baillies and other great persons had been pleased to notice him, and had even hinted that they might use their in-

fluence in his favour. At last there came one letter, more important than all the others, and straightway there was a great stir and noise of rumours throughout the islands.

"But I hef seen Ailasa herself, and she wass showing me the letter," said Nicol Lewis to his eldest brother, who was angrily expressing his disbelief in the news.

"And it iss ferry well that he cannot write to his own people, but to a stranger lass that hass nothing to do with him," Duncan Lewis said, gloomily smoking his pipe.

"And who will a young man write to, if not to the lass he is going to marry?" said Nicol Lewis. "And it is ferry proud Ailasa Macdonald is this day that he will hef done the great things in his classes; and who wass thinking when they built the fine stone school-house over at Maol-beg that it wass our own Alister will come to be the ferry first schoolmaster, yes, and mirover.

And he will hef the piece of land, too, and what will hinder him from keeping a cow? And I wass saying many's the time that it wass no great harm to a young man to hef spoken with the Lord Provost of Glasgow, and the great magistrates, and they will see our Alister he hass a head on his shoulters, and he iss ferry right to say that the day he will come back to Darroch that iss the day he will come back to be married; but the foolish young things to hef said it will be in the middle of the harvest, and a man will have to dance all night and go away to the shearing with his head full of the whisky, and not a half-hour's sleep for him between, that wass ferry foolish; but we will hef a good spree for all that—by Kott, it is the good glass we will drink when our Alister marries Ailasa Macdonald."

"It iss a very sure man you are, Nicol Lewis; but you are too sure of that," said the other,

rising and going away, with a dark look on his face. "It will be a bad glass you will drink when Alister Lewis marries Mrs. Macdonald's lass—a bad glass for her, and for you, and for him."

Nicol paid no heed to the words at the time; for indeed he had grown accustomed to hear his eldest brother talk in a strange fashion about Alister and Ailasa Macdonald. He remembered the words afterwards.

Meanwhile, however, there was nothing but joy and the hurry of preparation throughout the islands of Darroch and Killeena—and throughout one or two neighbouring islands besides—for everyone knew he would be asked to the wedding, and they were all busy in making up useful presents for Ailasa, and in sending to distant parts for the best whisky that could be got, just in case the bridal procession might come their way. The people were well-disposed towards

the young lass of Carn-Slean; they knew her mother had not much money in the bank; and so they bought blankets, and made clothes, and set aside portions of their own furniture for her, and many was the visitor who travelled all the way to Killeena to ask the blushing Ailasa what she would like. Then, one day, came a letter from Alister Lewis, addressed to Mrs. Macdonald, and the postman made her sign a receipt for that letter, much to her wonder. And inside there was nothing less than a parcel of £1 bank-notes—ten in all; and Alister asked the mother if she would take that to help in buying Ailasa's outfit, when she went to Stornoway for that purpose. Moreover the young man had long ago sent back to Nicol Lewis all the money the brothers had lent him when first he left Darroch—he was clearly prospering in the world.

Then Alister Lewis came back to his native

place to claim his bride; and he was more than ever overcome with wonder and delight at the beauty of her bright and tender face; and he was vastly pleased to see how smartly she was dressed; while she, trembling, proud, and glad dared hardly speak to him, lest he should think she had not as yet quite mastered the good English. And all the friends, relations, and distant acquaintances of the two families came over to old Hector Lewis's farm in Darroch, seven days before the marriage, to celebrate the forthcoming event.

It was a great gathering. If Alister Lewis had been going to marry a princess they could not have made more stir. For they cleared out the barn, and put long tables into it; and Nicol Lewis made a wonderful chandelier out of spars of wood, and this was hung from the roof of the barn, with no fewer than twelve candles on it. Then for supper they boiled twenty fowls in the

boiler used for preparing turnips for the cows; and such as could get seats at the board had the soup and the fowls placed before them just as if they were kings. Others were well content to have theirs outside, under the clear starlight, while they sate upon grindstones, or harrows, or even on the grass.

That was about eleven at night. Then all at once there was a wild skirl of pipes inside the barn; and presently all the people rose, and the piper, playing "The Campbells are Coming," marched proudly down the middle of them, and came out into the night air, the great company following. Then when he had come outside the music was suddenly changed into a reel; and in the strange glow shining all over the midnight sky there was enough light to show the people how to form rapid groups for the dance. It was a great festivity. There was more than one guest there who had himself sent over a five-gallon cask of

whisky to help the store; and there was no lack of the best Lagavulin from Islay or of the purest Campbeltown from Cantire. All the night through the sturdier members of the company—mostly married men and women—kept up the dancing with many a wild shout and hurrah, even until the day appeared in the east and the sun began to shine out and over the sea. Then those who had farms near went off to attack the work of the harvesting; while those who had come from greater distances lay down in the barn or in some empty cart to have a snooze before setting out to go home.

No one noticed that Duncan Lewis had absented himself from this gathering—no one but Alister, who was surprised and grieved. Next day Alister went to Ailasa and said—

"Ailasa, did you know that my brother Duncan was not among the people last night?"

"I did not know it, Alister," she said.

"It is something hard he is thinking of us, Ailasa," her lover said. "Now there is no one who can win over a man like a young lass; and if you would go to my brother Duncan, you would learn what he is thinking about, and he would be friendly with us again."

"Oh, Alister, I cannot go to your brother, Duncan," the girl said, almost with a look of alarm.

"But why will you not go?" her lover said, startled by this look.

She remained silent—her face downcast, her manner showing great embarrassment.

"I hope it is no secret you have from me, Ailasa," said he, reproachfully.

Still she would not answer; and the young man began to grow proud and distant.

"If it is a secret you have," said he, "I will not take it from you."

She hesitated for a moment, and regarded him

with an appealing look; then, finding nothing in his face but disappointment and coldness, she suddenly exclaimed—

"I cannot hef you quarrel with me, Alister, and just before our wedding-day. There wass a secret—but—but there iss no wrong in it—it wass that your brother Duncan he did ask me a few years ago to marry him—that wass all. And now you will know why I cannot go to him with the message."

"My brother Duncan!" the young man said, profoundly surprised, and yet finding in the circumstances an explanation of much in his brother's recent conduct towards himself. "And is he angry with you that you would not marry him, Ailasa?"

"I do not know," the girl said, simply. "Since that day he will not speak a word to me—not one. When I hef seen him coming along the road, he would go across the moor to be out of

the way. It wass many a time I will be ferry sorry that I hef done him any harm; but that is the one thing a girl cannot do—to marry the man she hass not in her heart; and she should not be blamed for that."

All this set Alister Lewis thinking.

"He is an angry man, Ailasa, when he is crossed," he said; "and yet the people will talk if he does not come to the wedding. I will speak to him myself, and maybe he will come to the wedding."

Alister had no difficulty in finding out his brother, who was at work in the fields. He remonstrated with him for not having joined the festivities of the previous night.

"And wass there not enough to go on wi' the drinking and dancing?" Duncan Lewis said, angrily. "It iss a good thing there is wan to look after the farm instead of filling his head with the whisky and going to sleep in a byre."

"But there is not a wedding every day, Duncan," the younger man said; "and there was no need to drink more than you cared for. If you had come to the supper, there was a good bed for you at any time."

"Ay," said the other, scornfully, "it iss a fine thing to hef many friends, and much merry-making, when you gif them all the fowls about the farm and more whisky as they can drink. It iss a ferry good thing to hef friends who will tell you you wass doing a good thing in getting married to a lass that hass not a penny."

"I hope you will come to the wedding, Duncan," the younger man said, humbly.

"What for should I come to the wedding?" the other said, sulkily.

"The people will talk if you do not come; and Ailasa Macdonald, she is a good lass, and you do not wish to hef people say that you would not come to her wedding?"

"Do not ask me to come to the wedding, Alister Lewis," said the other, going on with his work.

The younger man stood patiently there for a moment or two, wondering what sort of argument he could bring to bear. At length, in the incautiousness of youth, he blundered upon a dangerous remark.

"But this is what I think, Duncan," said he, "that people will talk about you, too, if you do not come to our wedding. Yes, sure enough, they will talk; and what will hinder them saying you wanted Ailasa for a wife yourself?"

The man dropped his scythe, as if he had been shot. He turned and confronted his brother—but on the face of the latter there was no expression of scorn. He was merely awaiting his brother's decision.

"Then, by Kott!" said Duncan Lewis, with a flash of anger in his black eyes, "I will come

to your wedding. It wass you yourself, Alister Lewis, that asked me to come to the wedding. And if I hef no ferry fine clothes to gif the lass, and if I am not good at the dancing—well, that iss no matter, for there are many more who will be ferry glad over the wedding. But oh, yes, I will be at the wedding, Alister—you can tell Mrs. Macdonald's lass I will be at the wedding."

Alister Lewis was himself sufficiently quick-tempered and might at another time have resented the scornful way in which his brother spoke. But a man who is about to be married ought to be forgiving towards a disappointed rival; and so he went back to Ailasa and told her that his brother Duncan had consented to come to the marriage.

CHAPTER V.

AILASA'S WEDDING.

THE great day of the marriage arrived; and at the earliest dawn the friends of bride and bridegroom left their small farms and cottages to join the big procession. There were two processions, indeed; that of Ailasa's friends, who had their own piper awaiting them at Killeena, and that of Alister Lewis's friends, whose piper was at Darroch. About ten o'clock these parties landed at different points on the great island adjoining—the mainland it was generally considered—and proceeded by convergent routes

across the moor towards a certain small inn where the ceremony was to take place.

It was a beautiful morning—the air was sweet with the resinous gale growing in the marshes, the sun shone brightly on the blue sea all around the islands. The people walked in couples, the piper at their head marching with his proudest step, letting his ribbons fly, and playing his most gladsome tunes. As they passed the solitary farms, the old and withered people came out to watch them with bleared eyes and give the young man a good wish; some would have had him take a glass for good luck, and he thanked them in such fine English, and he looked so handsome in his smart Glasgow clothes, that he quite won the old women's hearts.

Just before the inn was reached a wild cry of alarm was raised. Was not that the bride's party—a thin, bright line of colour far over the moorland? They could hear the faint sound of

the pipes—it was Ailasa's party, sure enough, and shame would fall on the young man if she and her friends should reach the place of appointment first.

"By Kott!" cried Nicol Lewis to the company behind him, "it is you old ones you can stay behind if you will; but Alister and me we will hef a run to the inn, as sure as I am alife we will not hef Mrs. Macdonald's friends be first at the inn."

And they would have rushed on by themselves, but the piper swore a dreadful oath that the bridegroom should not go to meet his bride unheralded by music, and the old man set out running too; whereupon all the people followed him, with wild shouting, and laughing, and helping of the elder folks, until, sure enough, they were at the inn first, the old piper recovering his breath sufficiently to be playing a splendid strain when the young bride and all her people arrived.

There was a great greeting of friends, and everyone was looking at Ailasa, and her fine clothes that had come from Stornoway. Then she came forward to shake hands with them all; and most specially she came forward to Duncan Lewis, and held out her hand. Alister Lewis had asked her to make friends with his brother, since he was coming to the marriage.

"And it is ferry glad, I am to see you this day, Duncan Lewis," the young girl said, shyly.

"Oh, ay," said he, looking at her so that she turned her eyes away, "a young lass is ferry glad to see anyone on her wedding-day. It iss a ferry good day for a young lass, the wedding-day."

That was all he said to her; and presently they went into the inn, the central room of which had been cleared; and there was a great noise of talking, and a calling for glasses of whisky and

pieces of bread and cheese, until the news went round that the minister had come. Then a hush fell over the assembly; and Ailasa, standing near to Alister Lewis, began to look frightened. The minister came into the room—a small, thin, white-haired, kindly-looking man, who looked as though he had been a fisherman in his youth. There was a small circle cleared in the crowd; and then the ceremony began. It was all in Gaelic, for there were many old people there who did not know much English; and some of these old crones may have thought the exhortation exceedingly long, as they were standing all the time. But at length it was all over, and then the minister shook hands with the newly-married pair, and drank to their health a glass of whisky, which Nicol Lewis, with great courtesy, brought in on a plate. Then the pipes struck up outside; and the people trooped out to the dancing; while the old woman of the inn and

her daughters began to arrange the tables again, so that the guests might have something to eat by and by.

The great festivity, however, was to be held at Hector Lewis's house in Darroch that evening, after which the young people were to go over to Carn-Slean, where Alister Lewis proposed to remain for a few days until the cottage attached to the schoolhouse of Maol-beg was finished, and ready for them. So the people did not stay long at the inn. Shortly after midday, both parties joined into one great company, and both the pipers now led the way, the bride and bridegroom immediately following. And now the old folks who came out to greet them had something to gladden their eyes with, for here was the bride as well; and it was a great favour if she would go in along with her husband to sit down by the hearth for a few minutes, while the company outside formed itself into eights,

and danced reels and strathspeys with unabated vigour. In this fashion they got down to the sea again; and here all the boats along these lonely shores had been brought together to take them across—all except Mrs. Macdonald's small rowing-boat which had been left at the other side of Darroch to ferry the young people at night over to Killeena.

Seven nights before, as has been duly chronicled, a great merry-making had taken place at Hector Lewis's farm, but it was as nothing compared to this merry-making of the marriage night, when even the most anxious had left their farms determined to have a good dram and a dance on so great an occasion. The supper was most sumptuous—there were huge salmon and many fowls, and such mutton as was fit to have been sent to the Duke of Argyll, or Sir James Matheson, or the Queen herself. Moreover, some well-to-do young fisherman, who had been

many times to Oban, and Greenock, and other distant places, and picked up a great deal of knowledge there, had secretly brought over to the farm a basket containing bottles of wine. It was a great grief to many that Ailasa would drink no whisky at all—that when every man drank "*Shlainte!*" to her, she would only touch her glass, and shake hands with him, and then put it down again. But when this cunning young fellow brought out the wine, it became known that the bride would drink a glass to her friends; and the noise ceased, and they all looked to her as she stood up, timid and rose-red, at the head of the table.

"I drink to your good health," Ailasa said, "and it is a great happiness to me that you hef come to my wedding."

Then Alister Lewis said the same thing, and he, too, drank a glass; and there was a great noise of cheering and congratulation, with only

one dissentient voice. That proceeded from Ian Ruadh—so named from his red hair—and this fiery-tempered and red-haired John called out in a querulous way,

"Why did she not speak in the Gaelic?"

"Be quiet, Ian!" said his wife.

"She should have spoken in the Gaelic," he replied.

"It is a foolish man you are," said one of his neighbours. "Would you have the wife of the new schoolmaster speak in the Gaelic, when it is no Gaelic at all they will be for having in the schools?"

"She should have spoken in the Gaelic; I say she should have spoken in the Gaelic!" he repeated in angrier tones, and he would have risen up to protest, but that two of his neighbours laid violent hands on him, and forthwith ejected him from the door. When he reappeared some half-hour thereafter, he had recovered his temper; but

he still said it was a shame she did not speak in the Gaelic.

Now amid all the dancing and revelry that was going on it had been arranged that Ailasa and her husband, along with a few friends, should quietly slip away, and get down to the boat, and go over to Killeena. And in order to do this unobserved—so that the guests should not think they were slighted—it was resolved that those thus departing should leave in pairs, and that Duncan Lewis should first of all take Ailasa down to the shore. When Alister told his bride of this proposal, which had originated with his eldest brother, he was surprised to see that she trembled slightly.

"What is the matter with you, Ailasa?" he said. "Are you afraid to go with Duncan for the few minutes, after he was fair enough to come to your wedding?"

"Yes, I am," she said. "I do not know why

he will look at me in a strange way—I am afraid of him."

"But that is a foolish fancy of yours, Ailasa," her husband said; "and it would be very bad if you put a slight upon Duncan, now that he wishes to be friendly with you. And he has been very friendly all the day, and he says he is going to give us the black cow when you go to Maol-beg."

"Oh, yes, he has been ferry kind, that is true," Ailasa said; and then, after a pause, she seemed to pull herself together. "You say what is true, Alister, I hef no right to be afraid of my husband's brother—that is ferry bad. I will go with Duncan when you are all ready to go over to Killeena."

In about half-an-hour thereafter, the word was given; and whereas the people who were dancing outside or drinking indoors, believed that Ailasa had retired for the night, she was really slipping

away from the back of the farm, accompanied by her brother-in-law. She was well wrapped up, for the wind had gone sharply round to the north-east, and the night looked blustering.

"It is a dark night this night," said her companion; "you will mind your footing."

Ailasa did not answer; the sound of his voice in the silence made her heart beat; she grew alarmed that nothing could be heard of any of the others leaving the farm behind them. And yet she was resolved to show that she was not alarmed; and presently she said in a cheerful way—

"It is a small boat to tek so many people over. They will hef to go over two or three at a time. And it is good work with the oars there will be, for the tide will be going out."

"Oh, ay," said he, "it is a bad night to tek many across to Killeena; and it will be all the less we will hef to carry over if you will go

over now, and I will bring the boat back again."

"Indeed, yes," she said, eagerly, for she was glad to think that by this means she should be left on the opposite shore by herself; "and that will be a ferry good plan. It was a pity they did not bring round one or two of the boats during the day. But it is not much trouble there will be whateffer."

The small rowing boat had been hauled up on the bank, where a sandy cove ran into the long grass and the weeds; but it cost Duncan Lewis little labour to drag it down, and get it afloat. The difficulty was in getting Ailasa into the boat with dry feet; for the sky was now wholly overclouded; and the whereabouts of the water could only be made out by the plashing of the wavelets on the beach. At length, however, she got in, and went on to the stern; and presently Duncan Lewis pushed

off. But he had only pulled a dozen strokes or so when he ceased rowing.

"It is a proud woman you are this day, that you are married, Ailasa Macdonald," he said.

She did not answer him.

"There wass others would hef made you as good a husband as Alister Lewis."

And again she did not answer; but there was something in the sound of his voice that struck a great chill to her heart.

"Ay, ay," said he, more fiercely, "you will laugh at me—you two together—and you will say I wass a foolish man to think of marrying a young lass. It is a ferry good laugh for you to hef together; and when the people will come to your house for a dram, it is a ferry good laugh you will gif them about Duncan Lewis over at Darroch—that he wanted a young lass—but she passed him by for a young lad that wass at the

schooling. And that is what you will do, Ailasa Macdonald."

There was a splash on each side of the boat, and she uttered a timid scream as she saw the white fire in the water, for she knew these were the oars.

"Duncan Lewis," she cried, "what are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" said he with a loud and harsh laugh; and she dimly saw that he was groping about the bottom of the boat; "it iss the two oars that hef gone into the sea; but this is what I am doing—that some one hass taken the cork out of the bottom of the boat—yes, when it wass on the bank—and by Kott, the water is coming in fast, and you will hef to swim ashore, Ailasa Macdonald!"

For a second or two she was too stupefied to utter even a scream. She knew, in her speechless horror, that what he had said was true, for

she heard the gurgling of the water; and at the same moment she saw his dark figure rise in the boat, and then disappear. He had jumped into the sea.

Some little time thereafter, a man, all dripping wet, was running across the marshy land lying between the sea and Hector Lewis's farm. He encountered three men about half a mile from the shore.

"Alister Lewis! Alister Lewis!" he cried, "it iss a bad night for you this night!"

"In the name of God, Duncan Lewis, where is Ailasa?" said the youngest of the three men.

"I wass taking her over in the boat—we wass not far from the shore—and the water came into the boat. It wass some one hass made the cork loose when the boat wass on the bank——"

"But where is Ailasa?" cried the young man, scarcely comprehending the story.

"Where is she? Ay, where is she?" said Duncan Lewis, clasping his hands over his head, apparently in an agony of grief. "The boat wass sinking—I had to swim ashore——"

With a shrill, sharp cry, as of a wild animal shot through the heart, the young man rushed off in the direction of the sea. He could not pick his way on such a dark night; but he cared not whether he kept or missed the rough foot-path leading down to the shore.

"Ailasa! Ailasa!" he shouted.

The silence of the night was his only answer.

He reached the water—there was a mournful plash of waves all along the beach—out there nothing but blackness.

"Ailasa! Ailasa!" he called; and the men who had run after him they, too, called "Ailasa! Ailasa!"

Was it fancy, or a wild reality, that he heard a faint and distant voice call "*Alister!*"—not

over there in the channel which he had been anxiously scanning, but far away out in the west, towards the open sea?

Again he set out, rushing wildly over the patches of rough heather and broken rock close by the beach. Every second or two he would stand and call "Ailasa!" and then, with the strange fancy that he still could hear a voice faintly replying, he would rush on again. At length, he reached the extreme corner of the island; all around him were the dark and moving waters of the sea. He called aloud.

"I can hear her! I can hear her!" he cried, as if his heart were breaking. "And there is no boat to go for her! Ailasa! Ailasa! why do not you pull into the shore?"

"You cannot hear her!" said Duncan Lewis, savagely. "It is a madman that you are, Alister Lewis! The boat wass sinking when I swam in to the shore; ay, ay, the poor lass wass in the

water; I could not bring her to the shore, for the tide it is ferry strong in the channel——"

He ceased abruptly; for the young man, who had been gazing into the unknown darkness with a fixed and strange stare, suddenly heaved a short, quick sigh, and then fell heavily back on the beach, as one dead.

CHAPTER VI.

"FAREWELL, MACKRIMMON!"

THAT was a wild night in Darroch. A great sound of lamentation arose when the news reached the wedding guests; the women came rushing out to fill the darkness with their cries of grief; the men, suddenly sobered, would search all along the shores — vainly groping about in the dark. There was no starlight to guide their search; the skies were black overhead; the wind came moaning over the bleak moorland, and the waves plashed mournfully and distantly on the beach.

"Ay, ay," said one of the men, "it iss no

use whateffer. The good lass is trooned—ay, ay, it is a bad night this night, and hersel' jist married mirover."

"Duncan Lewis," said another, "is not the man to leave a lass to be trooned if there wass a chance to save her; but he couldna soom ashore wi' her, wi' the tide going down the channel. Ay, ay, it wass many a time I hef told Mrs. Macdonald she should hef a bigger boat."

"She wass a bad boat, tamn her!" said another, fiercely. "And there wass stones in her, too, for old Tonald Maclean he would try a sail wi' her—tamn her, that teffle of a boat! The poor lass—the poor lass! And where iss Alister Lewis?"

"Ay, ay," said one of his companions, "he iss out at the point. He iss fair mad about it, and he says that he will hef hear her cry to him, and that she is gone out to the sea. But it is no possible—for the boat would go down—ay, ay,

the poor lass! the poor lass! And it wass a bad thing to hef the other boats away at the other side of the island—and the Lewis's fishing-boat, she is up on the sand, and they hef been working at her for three or two days or more, and she canna be put in the water—and if she could be put in the water, what wass the use o' that?"

Then it began to rain; and when at last most of the people had wandered down to the point, they tried to persuade Alister Lewis to go back to the farm; but he would not go. Duncan Lewis had gone to get dry clothes on; and two or three of the young fellows had started off to walk to the other side of Darroch, to bring round the boats as soon as the daylight began to lighten the sky. Meanwhile this melancholy company stood out at the edge of the sea, in the slow and soaking rain; and a great silence had fallen over them all.

Then they began to see each other somewhat more clearly. A strange blue light became visible all around; and they could make out something of the coast and of the dark island lying out there in the sea. Slowly a pale grey rose up in the east—slow and mournful—and they could see the pale grey sea, and the pale grey rocks, and the low-lying white mists that hung about the shores. So different was this morning to the morning that had ushered in Alister Lewis's marriage-day!

By and by, and far away in the distance, they heard the measured sound of oars; and here were some of the best oarsmen about the island bringing round two of the boats. What news did they bring? On their way they had found one of the oars belonging to Mrs. Macdonald's boat, which had been caught in a long and trailing mass of seaweed, and got drifted on to a small island of rock.

There was another burst of wailing when this news was told; for now it was clear that the boat had gone down, with the hapless girl who had so lately been made a bride. What was the use of putting out to sea? Nevertheless, in a hopeless fashion, Alister Lewis would get into one of the boats; and the young fellows pulled him out to the open waters.

A cold grey mist lay low over the sea, beaten down by the constant rain, and hung about the islands, too, so that their shores were scarcely visible. In all this wide picture of desolation there was no sign of life; as far as they could see, with eyes well trained to pick out the smallest objects on the waves, there was nothing floating there.

"No, no, Alister Lewis," said one of the young men, "the poor lass couldna hef drifted out to the sea, even if the boat wass afloat. For the tide would hef driven her on the Skeirmore

rocks, and 'there wass nothing there when we passed."

He did not ask them to go further; and indeed they had hard work to pull back against the wind, though the tide was on the turn. When they got back to Darroch again, the people had dispersed along the shores, seeking for some trace of the sunken boat, but nothing belonging to it, except the oar, had been recovered. Then they all went back to the farm, and sate down in silence; until Mrs. Macdonald suddenly threw up her hands again, and called aloud, "My good lass! My good lass!" whereupon all the people joined in her grief, the women rocking themselves to and fro, and saying with many sobs that there was no lass in all the islands so good a lass as Ailasa Macdonald. And this was noticed—that while the men, old men and young men, asked questions of Duncan Lewis about what had happened, he answered

them with his eyes fixed on the ground, and never once lifted them to any one's face; and of all the people there, Alister Lewis was the only one who would not ask any questions, but sometimes he stared in silence at his brother and at his downcast face.

What satisfaction could be gained from any questions or answers? They had wakened the lad out of his bed who had last pulled across the small boat, and had examined him about the cork in the bottom of that frail craft. He admitted that, during the day, finding the boat had been leaking, he and two others had pulled her up on the beach, and taken out the cork as the handiest method of baling her; but that the cork was properly put in again was proved by his having subsequently pulled the boat over to Killeena and back.

"Ay, ay," said Duncan Lewis, eagerly, when he heard this, "the cork was loose—ay, the

cork was maybe loose, and I may hef kicked it out with my feet."

"And it is a liar you are, Duncan Lewis," said the tall young lad, fiercely. "For I hammered the cork in with a stone; and how could you hef kicked the cork when it wass atween the spars?"

At this Duncan Lewis flew into a great rage, and would have laid hands on the boy but that the people held him back. There were one or two who looked at each other when, in the height of his passion, he said he would not be accused for nothing.

All the following day they searched the shores; and then they found the second oar—washed up by the tide on the Skeirmore rocks, where it had got hidden among the seaweed. They went round to the other islands, and sent messages to the fishing-stations and harbours; all to no purpose. They found out, indeed, that a

small schooner from Vatersay, in Barra, laden with herrings and bound for Stettin, must have passed round the outside of these islands just about daybreak on that fatal morning; and on the mere chance of this vessel having seen or heard anything of a castaway, they gave due notice to the ports at which she might call. In course of time the message came back. The *White Helen* had passed outside the islands in question about seven in the morning, but had seen nothing.

Day after day thus passed in hope but not in expectation; for there seemed to be no doubt about the fate that had overtaken Ailasa on the very night of her wedding. Alister Lewis was a changed man. In these few days he had grown haggard and silent—he would speak to no one. He only walked round the shores, or pulled out in a boat by himself, as if he still expected to hear his name called; and

when, if by chance he came into the house, he saw Duncan there, he immediately went out again. The two brothers had not exchanged a word.

One day Alister sought out his brother Nicol, and said to him—

"I am going away from Darroch, Nicol."

"And Kott's will be done, and a ferry good thing too," Nicol said, looking at the young man; "if you will stay in Darroch, Alister Lewis, it is a mad man you will be. The poor lass—ay, ay—what is the use of watching for her any more?—and you are thinking you hef heard her speak—it is like to mek you mad—yes, it iss a good thing you will go away and look after your school."

"I am not going to look after any school," said the young man, with a big lump rising in his throat, "that wass for Ailasa that I wanted to have the school. You would not have me

stay in Maol-beg now, Nicol Lewis? There is no man could do that."

"And where will you be for going then?" said Nicol.

"America."

The elder brother uttered a cry.

"Then it is no more we will see you in the world."

"I will go to Glasgow, and tell the gentlemen that they will get some one else for the school; then I can get a boat at Glasgow for New York. There are some here who will be glad to see me no more."

Nicol looked at the young man, half afraid; and suddenly the whole look and manner of Alister Lewis changed. A ghastly pallor shot into his face; he clenched his hands; and then he almost cried aloud——

"Yes! Do you know why it is that I am going to America! It is this, Nicol Lewis—that

if I live in this island another week there will be a murder here! yes, as sure as I am alive!"

"Alister!" the elder brother said, staring at him.

"A murder—yes!" the younger man said, with a vehemence that seemed to border on madness. "And maybe not the first within this month."

An indescribable horror was visible in Nicol Lewis's face; for this wild accusation was but the expression of many a strange and terrible fancy that had wandered before his own mind, and that he had striven to banish as the work of the devil.

"Alister Lewis, what is it that you say?" he replied, almost in a whisper. "What is it that you think? For the sake of Kott, Alister Lewis, you will not say that against your own brother!"

The younger man had grown more calm—at least, he had sunk into a sort of gloomy taciturnity.

"I have said what I have said, Nicol; let it be between you and me. But I must go away from this country, for there is one in it whose life is not safe while I am in it too. That is sure."

No one but Nicol knew why Alister Lewis was leaving for America, most considered that he could no longer bear those scenes with which he had been familiar in happier days. The old mother wept over him—she knew she should see him no more. All his brothers went with him as far as Stornoway to catch the Glasgow steamer there—all his brothers except Duncan, with whom he refused to shake hands on leaving Darroch.

"I have left Duncan Lewis alive; but see that he does not kill himself"—these were the

last words spoken apart to Nicol by Alister as they stood on the deck of the *Clansman*, just before the great steamer steamed out of Stornoway harbour.

CHAPTER VII.

THE "PRIEZ POUR MOI, S.V.P."

WHEN Duncan Lewis jumped out of the small boat into the sea, the sudden danger of which Ailasa became conscious did not deprive her of her senses. It was indeed with some sort of wild instinct of self-preservation that she immediately dashed down her hand towards the spot at which the water was rushing in; and that she found in a moment, for she was as well acquainted with the boat as Duncan Lewis had been ignorant of it. She tore off the woollen shawl that she wore; she stuffed one corner of

it as tightly as she could into the small hole; then she reached up her arm and took out one of the wooden thole-pins from the side of the boat. This thole-pin had been extemporised that very day; the rough bit of wood had been left much thicker at top than at bottom; some portion of it was sure to fit. She hastily wrapped round it a portion of the other end of the shawl, withdrew that already in, and in another minute the whole was safely plugged.

Then she looked around.

A great terror seized her, and yet she did not scream. Where were the people? She could hear no voices; only the sound of the waves along the unseen beach.

Then she remembered that the oars had gone; how should she make some despairing effort to get into land again? She threw out the stones that were in the bottom of the boat; she took the small tin can out of the locker in the stern

seat, and baled out a portion of the water, which was about a foot deep; then she unfixed the rudder, and went to the bow of the boat, and tried to use it as a paddle, now on one side, now on the other. But the work was hopeless. She had to stoop so far that her back began to ache; then her arms grew so tired with the unwonted labour that she could barely move this heavy piece of wood; and at length, wearied out and yet not quite aware of the peril that awaited her, she sate down on the middle thwart and began to cry silently.

A new sound startled her. The boat scraped against a rock. With a sudden joy in her heart she sprang to the side and reached out her arm—there was nothing there. She searched all around in the darkness—nothing but water. She knew now how rapidly the wind and tide combined were carrying her away; and as the wild fancy struck her that

that was the last point of the island that the boat had grazed, and that she was drifting out to sea, she rose and called aloud in her agony to her friends, and most of all to her young husband. Alas! there was not even an echo to these wild cries.

She might, however, drift on to the Skeirmore rocks; and as the sea, with the wind off the land, was here comparatively smooth, she would be able to scramble over the seaweed to some higher place of safety. But she could not make them out in the darkness of the night. She sate, waiting in silence now, with a great dread stealing over her heart, listening for the sound of the waves on the rocks. At length she heard it. It made her tremble; but yet it was welcome. She kept watching the water by the side of the boat lest she should be able to make out the first mass of stone or seaweed; and she knew now that the point of the long

and narrow island was near at hand. Still she kept her head down. The water was lapping all around the boat; it confused her as she tried to listen to the breaking of the waves close by. Then she rose again. Was not the sound more distant? She had gone by the Skeirmore rocks, and was drifting out to the open sea.

"*Ailasa! Ailasa!*"

She started to her feet again. Was not that the voice of her lover, far away and faint?

"Alister!" she cried. "Alister! Are you coming for me?"

She listened again. There was another sound of "*Ailasa! Ailasa!*" but it seemed more faint, and how could she send back an answer against the wind? Nevertheless, despair made her try again; she called aloud from time to time, and listened; then, when she could hear no reply, she gave herself up for lost, and

sate down in the boat, and could only cry bitterly that she should see Darroch, and Killeena, and her young husband no more.

So she sate through the weary hours, sleepless with her utter wretchedness, and yet sinking into a numbed state with the cold and the wet. She had sacrificed her shawl; it was now lying soaked in the bottom of the boat, one corner of it plugged in with the tholepin. She heard no more the sound of the waves along the coast; the waves were growing bigger; she knew that she was out at sea.

Day broke, cold, and grey, and misty. The islands that she could dimly see in the distance lay like huge black shadows in the white fog; but the more she gazed at them the more she was convinced that these were not the Skeirmore rocks, with Darroch and Killeena behind. Whither had she come? A sort of stupor was beginning to steal over her; the

pain in her heart alone prevented her sinking into the bottom of the boat, and letting the rain, and the wind, and the cold sea have their will of her.

She could not have closed her eyes; yet it was with a start that she saw, far down in the south-west, a small vessel apparently coming northward. Faint as the chances were that they would descry so small an object as this boat in the midst of the fog and the rain, the sight gave her new courage. She began to think of the ships she had watched many a day go by this remote and lonely coast; might not one of them pick her up and carry her to some port from which she could make her way back to her own home? And yet if this help were long delayed she knew that they would find only a corpse in the drifting boat.

How slowly the small and shadowy ship came along! She gazed at it with such in-

tensity that occasionally her head became giddy, and it seemed to disappear altogether; then with a quick anxiety she would rub her eyes and look again. It was a schooner. She stood up in the boat—and she had more difficulty now in balancing herself—and waved her handkerchief, looking anxiously all the while. Surely they must see her now! She watched the sails and the course of the vessel—her accustomed eye eager to perceive the slightest change in either. And there, sure enough, the schooner seemed to be slowly drawing nearer to her. She waved the handkerchief again. She began to tremble violently. Then she sank into the stern of the boat, keenly conscious of all that was around her, and yet apparently incapable of movement.

It was a small schooner, but it seemed like the huge ghost of a dozen men-of-war as it bore down upon her through the grey mists of

the rain. In a sort of dream she saw what the men were doing. She saw them shorten sail; then she heard voices; then the schooner hove-to, and the small boat was sent down. There were two men and a lad in it. They pulled towards her. They came nearer; and now the whole world seemed to be rocking and surging around her, and it appeared to her that she must struggle upward to save herself from drowning, and that she was powerless to act or to speak. They hailed her; she gave one loud cry; and then she knew no more.

When she came to herself she was on the deck of the schooner, and two or three men, weather-worn of face, were gazing at her in a wondering way, and speaking to each other in an unknown tongue.

"I am Ailasa Macdonald," she said; "I live in Killeena. Will you put me ashore at any place that is near to my home?"

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They shook their heads; and she saw they did not understand. But the skipper—a small red-faced man, who held a bottle and a glass in his hand—said to her—

"Engleesh?"

"Yes, yes," she said, eagerly.

"Vare, you, come?" he said, thinking of each word as he pronounced it.

She pointed over to the distant coast, now almost invisible in the fog.

"No wreck? No boat down?" he said, supplying with abundant gestures the missing words. "You come out—lost?"

"Yes, yes!" she said. "Can you take me ashore?"

He shook his head.

"Take you—there! Non! Not possible. You rest here—a boat he come back—you take the boat, yes?"

They were all regarding the beautiful young

girl as though she had dropped from the skies; and yet there was nothing rude or unkindly in their gaze. One of the crew came forward with some brandy in a cup; she shuddered and refused it; but he pressed her to take it so urgently that she sipped some. Then the captain touched her dress.

"Ferr bad—ferr bad!" said he, shaking his head; for her clothes were soaking wet.

He turned to the sailors and had some consultation with them in this unknown tongue. Then he motioned her to follow him; and although she guessed they were French, and knew that the French were not liked by the fishermen of her coast, still she had no fear of seafaring folk, and she followed him bravely.

He took her to the door of his own cabin, and pointed inside. He showed her the bolt; and when she hesitated, he said, with vehement gesture—

"No? Why no? Forr you—it is forr you. Go there, and me come back—you shall give the dresses by this way—they go to dry by the fire, yes? Why no? You are afrait? Mon Dieu, see!"

He showed her the bolt again; and there was a proud and hurt look in his face that gave her more courage than any voluble protestations could have done. She went inside the small cabin—it was not small in her eyes, accustomed as she was, to the resources of much smaller craft than a French schooner—and made herself quite at home there. The sailors treated her with the greatest thoughtfulness and kindness. The boy whom she had seen in the small boat was sent to the door of the cabin to wait for her wet clothes; he brought her some coffee and biscuits; he brought her, too, abundant coverings for the hammock, and though he could not speak a word, his big black eyes and browned hands showed her what to do. Then having partaken of this

frugal but comforting meal, she bolted the door of the cabin, she rolled herself up in the warm clothes, and, tired, cold, and heart-sick beyond measure, sank into a deep sleep.

When she awoke, her clothes were thoroughly dried; and she knew the difficulty they must have experienced in drying a woman's clothes on board a boat. When she had dressed herself she went on deck; and it seemed to her that she had entered upon a new life. Surely she had passed through the agony of death and left all her old friends and associations behind. For now it was clear midday; and the sun had rolled back the rain-clouds to the horizon; while far away across the blue sea a pale tall white object at the very extremity of the land, caught the sunlight and shone over the dark coast.

"It is the Butt of Lewis!" she cried in dismay.

"Lewis? Yes, yes, yes!" the small, red-faced, shrewd-eyed captain said.

Ailasa turned to him with terror in her face.

"And where do you go to now? You wass saying you would put me in a boat to tek me back."

He shrugged his shoulders; she had been speaking too quickly for him.

"Cannot you tek me back? Cannot you tek me back?" the girl cried wildly. "There is many a one that will pay you for the time—or if you will tek me only to the Lewis, and I will get back to Killeena. My friends they will all think I am dead now; and it wass only yesterday that they came to the wedding. And my husband, Alister, he will think that I am dead now!"

But these urgent protestations were lost on him. He shook his head. He could not understand her when she spoke like that.

"Listen," he said to her; and then he began, in a slow and careful fashion, to deliver the speech that he had word by word prepared while she

lay asleep in the cabin. "This boat is the *Pricz Pour Moi, S'il Vous Plait;* me, captain. We haf coaffee, vine, flour. We go to Iceland—bring back the salt feesh to Bordeaux. We go, we come back, you see? Ferr vell. You rest here; we see the ship you desire; you go wis her to English place—good?"

"You are going to Iceland?" she said. "Wass there any English ships there?"

He shook his head.

"No—not many Engleesh—one perhaps. But here, on the sea, many Engleesh ships—ve shall look—then you go back. But why you are in grand distress?"

"I hef no right to be," she said, sadly, and almost to herself. "You are ferry kind to me—kinder than my own kith and kin, that tried to murder me. And what hef I done that any one would try to murder me?"

And so the small vessel sailed away to the

north; and the girl sate and watched for the ship that was to take her back to her own country. That day they saw no fewer than five; but all of these the sailors told her would be of no use to her. When she looked disappointed, the small captain would ask her if she would rather go to America than to Iceland.

Bit by bit, as she found out how to make him understand her, she told him her story; and the man's face grew dark.

"He try to kill you!"

"I do not know," she said. "I hef wished not to believe that; but I cannot help it, and he wass my own husband's brother. It was a fearful night that night; and what are they all doing now? All going round the shore looking for me; or hef they gone away to the farms, thinking that I wass drowned, and Alister only he will be looking for me, out by the shores of Darroch, where I wass hearing him cry to me *'Ailasa! Ailasa!'*"

The further north they got, the more rarely they caught a glimpse of any distant vessel near the horizon; and by and by Ailasa resigned herself to going on with them to Iceland. Captain and crew were alike exceedingly kind and attentive to her. The cabin into which she had been at first ushered was reserved for her exclusive use. Such delicacies as the ship's stores afforded were prepared for her—indeed, she had been accustomed to considerably rougher fare in the rude islands of the Hebrides. And again and again she besought the captain—sometimes with tears in her eyes—to express to the men her gratitude to them for their kindness; and as for himself, she would leave it to her husband Alister Lewis to take the proper means of thanking him when she got back to her own home.

But another bitter disappointment was in store for her. After the long and tedious voyage that seemed to be carrying her beyond the confines

of the known world, they saw land at last; and when in course of time they sailed into the small port of Reykjavik, she looked forward with great joy to meeting some of her own countrymen, who would take her back to Wick, or Stornoway, or even Greenock. There was not a single British vessel of any description in the harbour. She cried silently; but she hid her tears; for she was ashamed to show apparent ingratitude to those who had done so much for her.

"You rest here—small time," said the captain, cheerfully. "We get the feesh, then we sail. Then you shall find many Engleesh ships, much many Engleesh ships, when we go back—hundreds Engleesh ships that go to Glasgow."

"To Glasgow," she repeated, mechanically. Should she have to go to that distant city of which she had heard—of which she had dreamed many a time in reading Alister's letters to her? All that she knew of the place was the address

of the shop in the Gallowgate to which she had sent her letters in reply.

"Haf you money?" said her friend the small captain.

"No, not any," she said.

"You want money, oh yes," he said, "when you go to Glasgow, Greenock, or the other harbour, for you to go home. Here some money. Pay me back in a letter."

He took out a well-worn leather purse, on the outside of which were large initials worked in gold beads.

"My vife," he said, with a proud smile, "my vife do that—yes. Here some money forr you."

He offered her three napoleons, which she took. But meanwhile she had quickly undone from round her neck the chain to which was attached a small and pretty silver watch that Nicol Lewis had bought for her in Stornoway

Both of these—while she was too much confused to speak—she offered to him.

"What is that?" he said with a sudden frown.

"It iss a present," she said timidly. "You hef been very kind to me."

"Non!" the French captain said, with angry vehemence. "Take away! No present forr me!"

He looked at the young girl—at her frightened and imploring face: then he shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"Be not afrait!" he said, motioning back her hand. "It is no matter. I am not angry. You air only a child"

CHAPTER VIII.

"AS WE RODE IN BY GLASGOW TOWN."

IN due course of time the small French schooner had taken in her cargo of salt-fish; the period of waiting having seemed innumerable ages to the young Highland girl. Then they set sail once more, and there was not any one of the seamen kept a better look-out than she did. And they were more fortunate on their voyage south; for before long they fell in with a homeward-bound steamer, the captain of which willingly took Ailasa on board. He would carry her to Glasgow, where she would take steamer for

Stornoway—that was the best he could do for her.

"You hef been a ferry good friend to me," said Ailasa to the captain of the French schooner, while tears were running down her face, "and I will not know at all how to thank you; but it iss my husband that will write to you; and if you wass coming any day into Styornoway or to Vatersay, or to Borva, and you wass sending a message to Carn-Slean in Killeena, or to Darroch, or to the schoolhouse at Maol-beg, there iss many and many a one that would be glad to go a long way to see you. Yes, and there will be many and many a one will be a friend to you, if they wass never to see you, and I will say that it iss a good friend you hef been to me."

Ailasa stood on the deck of the big steamer as it went throbbing on its way. She did not know that she was an object of great curiosity to the passengers on board, for she was still

regarding the small vessel that was being left behind, and waving her handkerchief to the good friends whom she was little likely to see again. Then she turned to find herself among a new set of strangers.

The captain of the steamer was a tall, burly, white-haired Scotchman, who talked in a bluff fashion that rather frightened her, but who was very kind to her all the same. And when on the next afternoon they sailed up the Clyde and got near to Glasgow—the girl was quite bewildered by the din of the dockyards and the sight of such great crowds of people—he said to her,

"Now, my lass, it winna do for ye to gang aboot the streets o' a big town; and I'm telled that the Stornoway steamer doesna sail the morn's morning, but the day after. Hae ye got any siller about ye?"

She showed him the three gold pieces, which he regarded with much contempt.

"Gie them to me," he said, "and I'll get ye something mair serviceable. Now take heed o' what I'm saying. I'll send one o' my men to put ye into a cab, and ye'll drive to that shop in the Gallowgate—do ye understand? Then ye'll tell Mr. Macilwham—and God forgie him for having such a name—wha ye are, and your belongings, and he'll put you in the way o' getting a comfortable lodging. And I'll lend ye a bag to put the bits o' things in that the leddies have given ye; but mind ye let me have the bag back again, for it doesna belong to me."

It was as one in a dream that Ailasa found herself in the great city of which Alister Lewis had often written to her. Surely there was nothing here of all that she had imagined. When she stepped on to the quay at the Broomielaw, the noise of the place terrified her; and she could only stare in a frightened fashion at the enormous masses

of houses, and the wonderful streams of men and women, and the strange vehicles in the streets. The sailor who was in charge of her treated her as if she were a child. He took her hand to lead her up to the cab, seeing that she almost shrank from venturing out into the street. Then he got on the box beside the driver, and they drove away.

What hideous roar and rattle was this that filled her ears? The great gaunt lines of houses seemed to have no end. She saw crowds of people such as she had scarcely imagined to exist in the whole world: and all at once, recollecting that she was alone in this vast multitude, knowing none and known to none, her courage fell away from her; it seemed to her that she was now as lost and forlorn as she had been that wild night out at sea, and that she should never see Alister Lewis, or her mother, or Killeena any more. The endless streets were blotted out by her tears.

She thought no more of the size of the place, except that it seemed to her she was plunging deeper and deeper into an inscrutable and terrible wilderness, from which there could be no escape. When, at length, the vehicle stopped, and the sailor came down to ask her to alight, she stepped out on the pavement with a look on her face as of a bird that suddenly finds itself in the hands of a snarer. The very skies and the free light of Heaven seemed shut out in the heart of this fearful city.

"Ay, my good lass, this is the shop," said the Scotch sailor; "dinna ye see the name ower the door?"

She timidly crossed the pavement.

"Here," said the man, "take your bag wi' ye, and mind what Captain MacIntyre telled ye. And I'll say good day to ye, and wish ye a quick passage back to Stornoway."

She was so bewildered that she could only thank him vaguely; then she went into the shop.

It was a strange place. There was no one at all in the front portion of it; and behind, in the gloom, she could see another large apartment, filled with large frames, and sheets of glass, and gilded decorations. It seemed hopeless to her to ask here for news of Alister Lewis; she could not believe now that this city in which she found herself was the Glasgow of which she had heard him speak.

But as her eyes got accustomed to the twilight she saw there were two dusky figures coming along through that lumber of window-frames and gilded mirrors; and as they came they spoke.

"The morn's mornin'?" said the elder of the two, who was in front. "Weel, I'm sorry to see the last o' ye, lad. But twa or three years will make ye forget what ye've come through. At seeven is it that ye sail?"

"Yes, indeed," said the younger man.

The sound of the voice thrilled through her, and

she would have run towards him but that the whole place seemed to reel round. She caught at the counter beside her; she vainly stretched out her other hand towards him: she could neither speak nor cry.

And then it seemed to her, before she sank into unconsciousness, that Alister Lewis turned a white and haggard face towards her, and that a wild cry of terror escaped from his lips as he gazed at her, trembling and irresolute. She could not help stretching out both hands to him—she said, "Alister, dinna ye know me?"—and then, as she fell, she knew that his arms were round her, and he was calling to her, and caressing her, and speaking to her as to one who had come back from the grave to delight and astonish those she had left behind.

"*Ailasa! Ailasà!*"—she heard the words, faintly and distantly, as she had heard them that night off the Skeirmore rocks, and when at last she came

to herself, that was all he could murmur into her ear, as he held her fast, so that the strange vision should not melt away and escape from him.

"Ailasa, my lass, where hef you been? Where hef you been, Ailasa?" he said. "I was never thinking to see you again in the world. It was the morn's morning I was going away to America. Ailasa, why dinna you speak to me?"

But here Mr. Macilwham, a quiet, little, grey-faced old man, who frowned because that his eyes were wet, came forward and interposed in a rough manner.

"Alister," said he, "have ye no sense, man? Let the lass alone! Ye'll have plenty o' time to ask her questions afterwards, and jist now, why, bring the lass into the back shop and we will get her some tea, and Mrs. Macilwham will come ower and see that she is put to rights. Come along, my girl. Dinna ye bother your head wi'

questions. It is a very gran' thing ye are safe and sound; and there's plenty o' time for the askin' o' questions. Alister, my man, jist you run across the street and bid the gudewife mak haste and step this way. Come along, my lass!"

That evening Ailasa sat in a little parlour in the Gallowgate, made very comfortable by the ministrations of the glazier's wife, and looking pleased and contented amid all the wonders and novelties of such a place. And Alister Lewis, who could not keep his eyes away from his young wife, who seemed to have come back to him, pale and beautiful, from the very realms of death, showed her a letter which he had just received from Darroch. It was from his brother Nicol, and this was one passage of it:—"God knaws I hef nothing to blame myself, but how wass I to speak to him, Alister, when you wass tell

me that fearful thing at Stornoway? And the people, too, they wass saying things mirover, and he wass not a blind man; and from one day to the other he wass seeing that no one would go near to him, and him a ferra proud man whatever. And it wass bad and ferra bad for us to have this great shame on our family; and Hamish and Donald they would say not one word; but every one he would know that the people wass thinking more as they would say. This was ferra strange, too, that he wouldna gang down to the sea, although the boat she wass wantin' the pentin and he wouldna gang down to the sea, but he wass keepin' about the farm from the mornin' till the night. Well, well, Alister, there wass many a one thinking he would go away from Darroch, but there wass no one thinking he would throw himself into the water, and it is a bad thing to hef a drooned man in the family when you go to the fishing, and him drooned

by his own hand. And it iss two of the family gone away now; and Mrs. Macdonald she will be for leaving Carn-Slean—and Ailasa away, too, there will not be much of a song or a dance about Darroch or Killeena for many's the year that is to come."

And so the letter went on, and Ailasa trembled and wept by turns to think of the desolation that had fallen over her home.

"But it will be a happier time, Ailasa, when you go back," Alister Lewis said, gladly enough, as he put his hand on the girl's shoulder, and patted her; "and it will be a great surprise to all the people when they see us together—as if you were come back from another world to them—and there will be many a good song and a dance yet in the islands all in good time. And that day will be a good day that you will go over the moor to Carn-Slean, for there was no one ever thinking you would see Carn-Slean

again. But you were saying, Ailasa, you will rather send them a message by the steamer, and that is very good, that they will not be frightened, and you will stay for a week or two to see the fine sights of Glasgow."

"Oh yes," said Ailasa, with a happy light shining in her blue eyes; "there iss many a thing I will like to see in Glasgow that they hef not heard of in Darroch or Killeena; and it will be a proud day the day that I will go back to Killeena and tell them all the fine things that I hef seen. And maybe," said the girl shyly, remembering her duty as a schoolmaster's wife, "maybe I will learn a little of the good English before we go back to Killeena."

II.

QUEEN TITA'S WAGER.

CHAPTER I.

FRANZISKA FAHLER.

IT is a Christmas morning in Surrey—cold, still, and grey, with a frail glimmer of sunshine coming through the bare trees to melt the hoar-frost on the lawn. The postman has just gone out, swinging the gate behind him. A fire burns brightly in the breakfast-room; and there is silence about the house, for the children have gone off to climb Box-hill before being marched to church.

The small and gentle lady who presides over the household walks sedately in, and lifts the

solitary letter that is lying on her plate. About three seconds suffice to let her run through its contents, and then she suddenly cries,

"I knew it! I said it! I told you two months ago she was only flirting with him; and now she has rejected him. And, oh! I am so glad of it! The poor boy!"

The other person in the room, who has been meekly waiting for his breakfast for half an hour, ventures to point out that there is nothing to rejoice over in the fact of a young man having been rejected by a young woman.

"If it were final, yes! If these two young folks were not certain to go and marry somebody else, you might congratulate them both. But you know they will. The poor boy will go courting again in three months' time, and be vastly pleased with his condition."

"Oh, never, never!" she says; "he has had such a lesson. You know I warned him. I knew

she was only flirting with him. Poor Charlie! Now I hope he will get on with his profession, and leave such things out of his head. And as for that creature"——

"I will do you the justice to say," observes her husband, who is still regarding the table with a longing eye, "that you did oppose this match, because you hadn't the making of it. If you had brought these two together they would have been married ere this. Never mind; you can marry him to somebody of your own choosing now."

"No," she says, with much decision, "he must not think of marriage. He cannot think of it. It will take the poor lad a long time to get over this blow."

"He will marry within a year."

"I will bet you whatever you like that he doesn't," she says, triumphantly.

"Whatever I like! That is a big wager. If

you lose, do you think you could pay? I should like, for example, to have my own way in my own house."

"If I lose you shall," says the generous creature: and the bargain is concluded.

Nothing further is said about this matter for the moment. The children return from Box-hill, and are rigged out for church. Two young people, friends of ours, and recently married, having no domestic circle of their own, and having promised to spend the whole Christmas Day with us, arrive. Then we set out, trying as much as possible to think that Christmas Day is different from any other day, and pleased to observe that the younger folk, at least, cherish the delusion.

But just before we reach the church, I say to the small lady who got the letter in the morning, and whom we generally call Tita,

"When do you expect to see Charlie?"

"I don't know," she answers. "After this cruel affair he won't like to go about much."

"You remember that he promised to go with us to the Black Forest?"

"Yes; and I am sure it will be a pleasant trip for him."

"Shall we go to Hüferschingen?"

"I suppose so."

"Franziska is a pretty girl."

Now, you would not think that any great mischief could be done by the mere remark that Franziska was a pretty girl. Anybody who had seen Franziska Fahler, niece of the proprietor of the "Goldenen Bock" in Hüferschingen, would admit that in a moment. But this is nevertheless true, that our important but diminutive Queen Tita was very thoughtful during the rest of our walk to this little church; and in church, too, she was thinking so deeply that she almost forgot to look at the effect of the decorations

she had nailed up the day before. Yet nothing could have offended her in the bare observation that Franziska was a pretty girl.

At dinner, in the evening, we had our two guests and a few young fellows from London who did not happen to have their families or homes there. Curiously enough, there was a vast deal of talk about travelling, and also about Baden, and more particularly about the southern districts of Baden. Tita said the Black Forest was the most charming place in the world; and as it was Christmas Day, and as we had been listening to a sermon all about charity, and kindness, and consideration for others, nobody was rude enough to contradict her. But our forbearance was put to a severe test, when, after dinner, she produced a photographic album and handed it round, and challenged everybody to say whether the young lady in the corner was not absolutely lovely. Most of them said that

she was certainly very nice-looking; and Tita seemed a little disappointed.

I perceived that it would no longer do to say that Franziska was a pretty girl. We should henceforth have to swear by everything we held dear that she was absolutely lovely.

CHAPTER II.

ZUM "GOLDENEN BOCK."

WE felt some pity for the lad when we took him abroad with us; but it must be confessed that at first he was not a very desirable travelling companion. There was a gloom about him. Despite the eight months that had elapsed, he professed that his old wound was still open. Tita treated him with the kindest maternal solicitude, which was a great mistake: tonics, not sweets, are required in such cases. Yet he was very grateful, and he said, with a blush, that, in any case, he would not rail against all women because of the badness of one. Indeed, you

would not have fancied he had any great grudge against womankind. There were a great many English abroad that autumn, and we met whole batches of pretty girls at every station and every *table d'hôte* on our route. Did he avoid them, or glare at them savagely, or say hard things of them? Oh, no!—quite the reverse. He was a little shy at first: and when he saw a party of distressed damsels in a station, with their bewildered father in vain attempting to make himself understood to a porter, he would assist them in a brief and business-like manner, as if it were a duty, lift his cap, and then march off, relieved. But by and by he began to make acquaintances in the hotels; and, as he was a handsome, English-looking lad, who bore a certificate of honesty in his clear grey eyes and easy gait, he was rather made much of. Nor could any fault be decently found with his appetite.

So we passed on from Königswinter to Coblentz,

and from Coblentz to Heidelberg, and from Heidelberg south to Freiburg, where we bade adieu to the last of the towns and laid hold of a trap with a pair of ancient and angular horses, and plunged into the Höllenthal, the first great gorge of the Black Forest mountains. From one point to another we slowly urged our devious course, walking the most of the day indeed, and putting the trap and ourselves up for the night at some quaint roadside hostelry, where we ate of roe-deer, and drank of Affenthaler, and endeavoured to speak German with a pure Waldshut accent. And then one evening, when there was a clear green-and-gold sky overhead, and when the last rays of the sun were shining along the hills and touching the stems of the tall pines, we drove into a narrow valley and caught sight of a large brown building of wood, with projecting eaves and quaint windows, that stood close by the forest.

"Here is my dear inn!" cried Tita, with a great glow of delight and affection in her face. "Here is *mein gutes Thal! Ich grüss' dich ein tausend Mal!* And here is old Peter come out to see us; and there is Franziska!"

"Oh! this is Franziska, is it?" said Charlie.

Yes, this was Franziska. She was a well-built, handsome girl of nineteen or twenty, with a healthy, sun-burnt complexion, and dark hair plaited into two long tails which were taken up and twisted into a knot behind. That you could see from a distance. But on nearer approach you found that Franziska had really fine and intelligent features, and a pair of frank, clear, big brown eyes that had a very straight look about them. They were something of the eyes of a deer, indeed; wide apart, soft, and apprehensive, yet looking with a certain directness and unconsciousness that overcame her natural girlish timidity. Tita simply flew at her and kissed her heartily, and asked

her twenty questions at once. Franziska answered in very fair English, a little slow and formal, but quite grammatical. Then she was introduced to Charlie, and she shook hands with him in a simple and unembarrassed way, and then she turned to one of the servants and gave some directions about the luggage. Finally, she begged Tita to go indoors and get off her travelling attire, which was done, leaving us two outside.

"She's a very pretty girl," Charlie said, carelessly. "I suppose she's sort of head cook and kitchenmaid here."

The impudence of these young men is something extraordinary.

"If you wish to have your head in your hands," I remarked to him, "just you repeat that remark at dinner. Why, Franziska is no end of a swell. She has two thousand pounds and the half of a mill. She has a sister married to the Geheimer-Ober-Hofbaurath of Hesse-

Cassel. She has visited both Paris and Munich; and she has her dresses made in Freiburg."

"But why does such an illustrious creature bury herself in this valley, and in an old inn, and go about bareheaded?"

"Because there are folks in the world without ambition, who like to live a quiet, decent, homely life. Every girl can't marry a Geheimer-Ober-Hofbaurath. Ziska, now, is much more likely to marry the young doctor here."

"Oh, indeed! and live here all her days. She couldn't do better. Happy Franziska!"

We went indoors. It was a low, large, rambling place, with one immense room all hung round with roe-deers' horns, and with one lesser room fitted up with a billiard-table. The inn lay a couple of hundred yards back from Hüferschingen, but it had been made the head-quarters of the keepers, and just outside this room were a number of pegs for them to sling their guns and bags

on when they came in of an evening to have a pipe and a chopin of white wine. Ziska's uncle and aunt were both large, stout, and somnolent people, very good-natured and kind, but a trifle dull. Ziska really had the management of the place, and she was not slow to lend a hand if the servants were remiss in waiting on us. But that, it was understood, was done out of compliment to our small Queen Tita.

By and by we sat down to dinner, and Franziska came to see that everything was going on straight. It was a dinner "with scenery." You forgot to be particular about the soup, the venison, and the Affenthaler, when from the window at your elbow you could look across the narrow valley and behold a long stretch of the Black Forest shining in the red glow of the sunset. The lower the sun sank the more intense became the crimson light on the tall stems of the pines; and then you could see the line of shadow slowly

rising up the side of the opposite hill until only the topmost trees were touched with the fire. Then these, too, lost it, and all the forest around us seemed to have a pale blue mist stealing over it as the night fell and the twilight faded out of the sky overhead. Presently the long undulations of fir grew black, the stars came out, and the sound of the stream could be heard distantly in the hollow; and then, at Tita's wish, we went off for a last stroll in among the soft moss and under the darkness of the pines, now and again startling some great capercailzie and sending it flying and whirring down the glades.

When we returned from that prowl into the forest we found the inn dark. Such people as may have called in had gone home; but we suspected that Franziska had given the neighbours a hint not to overwhelm us on our first arrival. When we entered the big room, Franziska came

in with candles; then she brought some matches, and also put on the table an odd little pack of cards, and went out. Her uncle and aunt had, even before we went out, come and bade us good night formally and shaken hands all round. They are early folk in the Black Forest.

"Where has that girl gone now?" says Charlie. "Into that lonely billiard-room? Couldn't you ask her to come in here? Or shall we go and play billiards?"

Tita stares, and then demurely smiles; but it is with an assumed severity that she rebukes him for such a wicked proposal, and reminds him that he must start early next morning. He groans assent. Then she takes her leave.

The big young man sits silent for a moment or two, with his hands in his pockets and his legs stretched out. I begin to think I am in for it—the old story of blighted hopes, and angry denunciation, and hypocritical joy, and all the

rest of it. But suddenly Charlie looks up with a business-like air, and says:

"Who is that doctor fellow you were speaking about? Shall we see him to-morrow?"

"You saw him to-night. It was he who passed us on the road with the two beagles."

"What, that little fellow with the bandy legs and the spectacles?" he cries, with a great laugh.

"That little fellow," I observe to him, "is a person of some importance, I can tell you. He"——

"I suppose his sister married a Geheimer-Ober-under—what the dickens is it?" says this disrespectful young man.

"Dr. Krumm has got the Iron Cross."

"That won't make his legs any the straighter."

"He was at Weissemburg."

"I suppose he got that cast in the eye there."

"He can play the zither in a way that would

astonish you. He has got a little money. Franziska and he would be able to live very comfortably together."

"Franziska and that fellow?" says Charlie; and then he rises with a sulky air, and proposes we should take our candles with us.

But he is not sulky very long; for Ziska, hearing our footsteps, comes to the passage and bids us a friendly good-night.

"Good-night, Miss Fahler!" he says, in rather a shamefaced way; "and I am so awfully sorry we have kept you up so late. We shan't do it again."

You would have thought by his manner that it was two o'clock; whereas it was only half-past eleven!

CHAPTER III.

DR. KRUMM.

THERE was no particular reason why Dr. Krumm should marry Franziska Fahler, except that he was the most important young man in Hüferschingen, and she was the most important young woman. People therefore thought they would make a good match; although Franziska certainly had the most to give in the way of good looks. Dr. Krumm was a short, bandy-legged, sturdy young man, with long fair hair, a tanned complexion, light blue eyes not quite looking the same way, spectacles, and a general

air of industrious common-sense about him, if one may use such a phrase. There was certainly little of the lover in his manner towards Ziska, and as little in hers towards him. They were very good friends, though, and he called her Ziska, while she gave him his nickname of Fidelio, his real name being Fidele.

Now on this, the first morning of our stay in Hüferschingen, all the population had turned out at an early hour to see us start for the forest; and as the Ober-Förster had gone away to visit his parents in Bavaria, Dr. Krumm was appointed to superintend the operations of the day. And when everybody was busy renewing acquaintance with us, gathering in the straying dogs, examining guns and cartridge-belts, and generally aiding in the profound commotion of our setting out, Dr. Krumm was found to be talking in a very friendly and familiar manner with our pretty Franziska. Charlie eyed them

askance. He began to say disrespectful things of Krumm. He thought Krumm a plain person. And then, when the bandy-legged Doctor had got all the dogs, keepers, and beaters together, we set off along the road, and presently plunged into the cool shade of the forest, where the thick moss suddenly silenced our footsteps, and where there was a moist and resinous smell in the air.

Well, the incidents of the forenoon's shooting, picturesque as they were, and full of novelty to Tita's *protégé*, need not be described. At the end of the fourth drive, when we had got on nearly to luncheon-time, it appeared that Charlie had killed a handsome buck, and he was so pleased with this performance that he grew friendly with Dr. Krumm, who had, indeed, given him the *haupt-stelle*. But when, as we sat down to our sausages and bread and red wine, Charlie incidentally informed our commander-

in-chief that, during one of the drives, a splendid yellow fox had come out of the underwood and stood and stared at him for three or four seconds, the Doctor uttered a cry of despair.

"I should have told you that," he said, in English that was not quite so good as Ziska's, "if I had remembered, yes! The English will not shoot the foxes; but they are very bad for us, they kill the young deer; we are glad to shoot them; and Franziska she told me she wanted a yellow fox for the skin to make something."

Charlie got very red in the face. He *had* missed a chance. If he had known that Franziska wanted a yellow fox, all the instinctive veneration for that animal that was in him would have gone clean out, and the fate of the animal—for Charlie was a smart shot—would have been definitely sealed.

"Are there many of them?" said he, gloomily.

"No; not many. But where there is one there are generally four or five. In the next drive we may come on them, yes! I will put you in a good place, sir; and you must not think of letting him go away, for Franziska, who has waited two, three weeks, and not one yellow fox not anywhere, and it is for the variety of the skin in a — a —. I do not know what you call it."

"A rug, I suppose," said Charlie.

I subsequently heard that Charlie went to his post with a fixed determination to shoot anything of yellow colour that came near him. His station was next to that of Dr. Krumm; but of course they were invisible to each other. The horns of the beaters sounded a warning; the gunners cocked their guns and stood on the alert; in the perfect silence each one waited for the first glimmer of a brown hide down the long green glades of young fir. Then, accord-

ing to Charlie's account, by went two or three deer like lightning—all of them does. A buck came last, but swerved just as he came in sight, and backed and made straight for the line of beaters. Two more does, and then an absolute blank. One or two shots had been heard at a distance; either some of the more distant stations had been more fortunate, or one or other of the beaters had tried his luck. Suddenly there was a shot fired close to Charlie—he knew it must have been the Doctor. In about a minute afterwards he saw some pale yellow object slowly worming its way through the ferns; and here, at length, he made sure he was going to get his yellow fox. But just as the animal came within fair distance, it turned over, made a struggle or two, and lay still. Charlie rushed along to the spot; it was, indeed, a yellow fox, shot in the head, and now as dead as a door-nail.

What was he to do? Let Dr. Krumm take

home this prize to Franziska, after he had had such a chance in the forenoon? Never! Charlie fired a barrel into the air, and then calmly awaited the coming up of the beaters and the drawing together of the sportsmen.

Dr. Krumm, being at the next station, was the first to arrive. He found Charlie standing by the side of the slain fox.

"Ha!" he said, his spectacles apparently gleaming with delight, "you have shotted him You have killed him! That is very good!—that is excellent! Now, you will present the skin to Miss Franziska, if you do not wish to take it to England."

"Oh, no!" said Charlie, with a lordly indifference. "I don't care about it. Franziska may have it."

Charlie pulled me aside, and said, with a solemn wink,

"Can you keep a secret?"

"My wife and I can keep a secret. I am not allowed to have any for myself."

"Listen," said the unabashed young man, "Krumm shot that fox. Mind you don't say a word. I must have the skin to present to Franziska."

I stared at him; I had never known him guilty of a dishonest action. But when you do get a decent young English fellow condescending to do anything shabby, be sure it is a girl who is the cause. I said nothing, of course; and in the evening a trap came for us, and we drove back to Hüferschingen.

Tita clapped her hands with delight: for Charlie was a favourite of hers, and now he was returning like a hero, with a sprig of fir in his cap to show that he had killed a buck.

"And here, Miss Franziska," he said, quite gaily, "here is a yellow fox for you. I was told that you wanted the skin of one."

Franziska fairly blushed for pleasure; not that the skin of a fox was very valuable to her, but that the compliment was so open and marked. She came forward, in German fashion, and rather shyly shook hands with him, in token of her thanks.

When Tita was getting ready for dinner I told her about the yellow fox. A married man must have no secrets.

"He is not capable of such a thing," she says, with a grand air.

"But he did it," I point out. "What is more, he glories in it. What did he say when I remonstrated with him on the way home? '*Why*,' says he, '*I will put an end to Krumm! I will abolish Krumm! I will extinguish Krumm!*' Now, Madam, who is responsible for this? Who has been praising Franziska night and day as the sweetest, gentlest, cleverest girl in the world, until this young

man determines to have a flirtation with her and astonish you?"

"A flirtation!" says Tita, faintly. "Oh, no! Oh! I never meant that."

"Ask him just now, and he will tell you that women deserve no better. They have no hearts. They are treacherous. They have beautiful eyes, but no conscience. And so he means to take them as they are, and have his measure of amusement."

"Oh! I am sure he never said anything so abominably wicked," cries Tita, laying down the rose that Franziska had given her for her hair. "I know he could not say such things. But if he is so wicked—if he has said them—it is not too late to interfere. *I* will see about it."

She drew herself up as if Jupiter had suddenly armed her with his thunderbolts. If Charlie had seen her at this moment he would

have quailed. He might, by chance, have told the truth, and confessed that all the wicked things he had been saying about woman's affection were only a sort of rhetoric; and that he had no sort of intention to flirt with poor Franziska, nor yet to extinguish and annihilate Dr. Krumm.

The heartbroken boy was in very good spirits at dinner. He was inclined to wink. Tita, on the contrary, maintained an impressive dignity of demeanour; and when Franziska's name happened to be mentioned she spoke of the young girl as her very particular friend, as though she would dare Charlie to attempt a flirtation with one who held that honour. But the young man was either blind or reckless, or acting a part for mere mischief. He pointed the finger of scorn at Dr. Krumm. He asked Tita if he should bring her a yellow fox next day. He declared he wished he could spend the re-

mainder of his life in a Black Forest inn, with a napkin over his arm, serving chopins. He said he would brave the wrath of the Fürst by shooting a caperçailzie on the very first opportunity, to bring the shining feathers home to Franziska.

When Tita and I went up stairs at night the small and gentle creature was grievously perplexed.

"I cannot make it out," she said. "He is quite changed. What is the matter with him?"

"You behold, madam, in that young man, the moral effects of vulpicide. A demon has entered into him. You remember, in 'Der Freischütz,' how"——

"Did you say vulpicide?" she asks, with a sweet smile. "I understood that Charlie's crime was that he did *not* kill the fox."

I allow her the momentary triumph. Who

would grudge to a woman a little verbal victory of that sort? And, indeed, Tita's satisfaction did not last long. Her perplexity became visible on her face once more.

"We are to be here three weeks," she said, almost to herself, "and he talks of flirting with poor Franziska. Oh! I never meant that."

"But what did you mean?" I ask, with some innocent wonder.

Tita hangs down her head, and there is an end to that conversation; but one of us, at least, has some recollection of a Christmas wager.

CHAPTER IV.

CONFESSIO AMANTIS.

CHARLIE was not in such good spirits next morning. He was standing outside the inn in the sweet, resinous-scented air, watching Franziska coming and going, with her bright face touched by the early sunlight, and her frank and honest eyes lit up by a kindly look when she passed us. His conscience began to smite him for claiming that fox.

We spent the day in fishing a stream some few miles distant from Hüferschingen; and Franziska accompanied us. What need to tell

of our success with the trout and the grayling, or of the beautiful weather, or of the attentive and humble manner in which the unfortunate youth addressed Franziska from time to time?

In the evening we drove back to Hüferschingen. It was a still and beautiful evening, with the silence of the twilight falling over the lonely valleys and the miles upon miles of darkening pines. Charlie has not much of a voice, but he made an effort to sing with Tita,

> The winds whistle cold and the stars glimmer red,
> The sheep are in fold and the cattle in shed;

and the fine old glee sounded fairly well as we drove through the gathering gloom of the forest. But Tita sang, in her low, sweet fashion, that Swedish bridal song that begins,

> O welcome her so fair, with bright and flowing hair,
> May Fate through life befriend her—love and smiles attend her

and though she sang quietly, just as if she were singing to herself, we all listened with a great attention, and with great gratitude too. When we got to Hüferschingen the stars were out over the dark stretches of the forest, and the windows of the quaint old inn were burning brightly.

"And have you enjoyed the amusement of the day?" says Miss Fahler, rather shyly, to a certain young man who is emptying his creel of fish. He drops the basket to turn round and look at her face, and say earnestly,

"I have never spent so delightful a day. But it wasn't the fishing."

Things were becoming serious.

And next morning Charlie got hold of Tita, and said to her, in rather a shame-faced way,

"What am I to do about that fox? It was only a joke, you know; but if Miss Fahler

gets to hear of it, she'll think it was rather shabby."

It was always Miss Fahler now; a couple of days before it was Franziska.

"For my part," says Tita, "I can't understand why you did it. What honour is there in shooting a fox?"

"But I wanted to give the skin to her."

It was "her" by this time.

"Well, I think the best thing you can do is to go and tell her all about it; and also to go and apologise to Dr. Krumm."

Charlie started.

"I will go and tell her certainly; but as for apologising to Krumm, that is absurd!"

"As you please," says Tita.

By and by Franziska—or, rather, Miss Fahler—came out of the small garden and round by the front of the house.

"Oh! Miss Fahler," says Charlie, suddenly;

and with that she stops, and blushes slightly; "I've got something to say to you. I am going to make a confession. Don't be frightened; it's only about a fox. The fox that was brought home the day before yesterday, Dr. Krumm shot that."

"Indeed," says Franziska, quite innocently, "I thought you shot it."

"Well, I let them imagine so. It was only a joke."

"But it is of no matter; there are many yellow foxes. Dr. Krumm can shoot them at another time. He is always here. Perhaps you will shoot one before you go."

With that Franziska passed into the house, carrying her fruit with her. Charlie was left to revolve her words in his mind. Dr. Krumm could shoot foxes when he chose; he was always here. He, Charlie, on the contrary, had to go away in little more than a fortnight.

There was no Franziska in England—no pleasant driving through great pine woods in the gathering twilight—no shooting of yellow foxes, to be brought home in triumph and presented to a beautiful and grateful young woman. Charlie walked along the white road and overtook Tita, who had just sat down on a little camp-stool, and got out the materials for taking a water-colour sketch of the Hüferschingen valley. He sat down at her feet, on the warm grass.

"I suppose I shan't interrupt your painting by talking to you?" he says.

"Oh dear, no," is the reply: and then he begins, in a somewhat hesitating way, to ask indirect questions, and drop hints, and fish for answers, just as if this small creature, who was busy with her sepias and olive-greens, did not see through all this transparent cunning.

At last she said to him, frankly,

"You want me to tell you whether Franziska

would make a good wife for you. She would make a good wife for any man. But then you seem to think that I should intermeddle, and negotiate, and become a go-between. How can I do that? My husband is always accusing me of trying to make up matches; and you know that isn't true."

"I know it isn't true," says the hypocrite. "But you might only this once. I believe all you say about this girl—I can see it for myself; and when shall I ever have such a chance again?"

"But, dear me!" says Tita, putting down the white pallet for a moment, "how can I believe you are in earnest? You have only known her three days."

"And that is quite enough," says Charlie, boldly, "to let you find out all you want to know about a girl, if she is of the right sort. If she isn't, you won't find out in three years.

Now, look at Franziska. Look at the fine, intelligent face and the honest eyes; you can have no doubt about her; and then I have all the guarantee of your long acquaintance with her."

"Oh," says Tita, "that is all very well. Franziska is an excellent girl, as I have told you often—frank, kind, well-educated, and unselfish. But you cannot have fallen in love with her in three days?—"

"Why not?" says this blunt-spoken young man.

"Because it is ridiculous. If I meddle in the affair I should probably find you had given up the fancy in other three days; or, if you did marry her and took her to England, you would get to hate me because I alone should know that you had married the niece of an innkeeper."

"Well, I like that!" says he, with a flush

in his face. "Do you think I should care two straws whether my friends knew I had married the niece of an innkeeper? I should show them Franziska. Wouldn't that be enough? An innkeeper's niece! I wish the world had more of 'em, if they're like Franziska."

"And besides," says Tita, "have you any notion as to how Franziska herself would probably take this mad proposal?"

"No," says the young man, humbly. "I wanted you to try and find out what she thought about me; and if, in time, something were said about this proposal, you might put in a word or two, you know, just to—to give her an idea, you know, that you don't think it quite so mad, don't you know?"

"Give me your hand, Charlie," says Tita, with a sudden burst of kindness. "I'll do what I can for you; for I know she's a good girl,

and she will make a good wife to the man who marries her."

You will observe that this promise was given by a lady who never, in any circumstances whatsoever, seeks to make up matches, who never speculates on possible combinations when she invites young people to her house in Surrey, and who is profoundly indignant, indeed, when such a charge is preferred against her. Had she not, on that former Christmas morning, repudiated with scorn the suggestion that Charlie might marry before another year had passed? Had she not, in her wild confidence, staked on a wager that assumption of authority in her household and out of it without which life would be a burden to her? Yet no sooner was the name of Franziska mentioned—and no sooner had she been reminded that Charlie was going with us to Hüferschingen—than the nimble little brain set to work. Oftentimes it has occurred to one

dispassionate spectator of her ways that this same Tita resembled the small object which, thrown into a dish of some liquid chemical substance, suddenly produces a mass of crystals. The constituents of those beautiful combinations, you see, were there; but they wanted some little shock to hasten on the slow process of crystallization. Now, in our social circle we have continually observed groups of young people floating about in an amorphous and chaotic fashion—good for nothing but dawdling through dances, and flirting and carelessly separating again; but when you dropped Tita among them, then you would see how rapidly this jelly-fish sort of existence was abolished—how the groups got broken up —and how the sharp, business-like relations of marriage were precipitated and made permanent. But would she own to it? Never! She once went and married her dearest friend to a Prussian officer; and now she declares he was a selfish

fellow to carry off the girl in that way, and rates him soundly because he won't bring her to stay with us more than three months out of the twelve. There are some of us get quite enough of this Prussian occupation of our territory.

"Well," says Tita to this long English lad, who is lying sprawling on the grass, "I can safely tell you this, that Franziska likes you very well."

He suddenly jumps up, and there is a great blush on his face.

"Has she said so?" he asks, eagerly.

"Oh, yes! in a way. She thinks you are good-natured. She likes the English, generally. She asked me if that ring you wear was an engaged ring."

These disconnected sentences were dropped with a tantalizing slowness into Charlie's eager ears.

"I must go and tell her directly that it is not," said he; and he might probably have gone off at once had not Tita restrained him.

"You must be a great deal more cautious than that if you wish to carry off Franziska some day or other. If you were to ask her to marry you now she would flatly refuse you, and very properly; for how could the girl believe you were in earnest? But if you like, Charlie, I will say something to her that will give her a hint; and if she cares for you at all before you go away she won't forget you. I wish I was as sure of you as I am of her.

"Oh! I can answer for myself," says the young man, with a becoming bashfulness.

Tita was very happy and pleased all that day. There was an air of mystery and importance about her. I knew what it meant. I had seen it before.

Alas! poor Charlie.

CHAPTER V.

"GAB MIR EIN' RING DABEI."

UNDER the friendly instructions of Dr. Krumm, whom he no longer regarded as a possible rival, Charlie became a mighty hunter; and you may be sure that when he returned of an evening with sprigs of fir in his cap for the bucks he had slain, Franziska was not the last to come forward and shake hands with him, and congratulate him, as is the custom in these primitive parts. And then she was quite made one of the family when we sat down to dinner in the long, low-roofed room; and nearly every evening,

indeed, Tita would have her to dine with us and play cards with us.

You may suppose if these two young folk had any regard for each other, those evenings in the inn must have been a pleasant time for them. There never were two partners at whist who were so courteous to each other, so charitable to each other's blunders. Indeed, neither would ever admit that the other blundered. Charlie used to make some frightful mistakes occasionally that would have driven any other player mad; but you should have seen the manner in which Franziska would explain that he had no alternative but to take her king with his ace; that he could not know this, and was right in chancing that. We played threepenny points, and Charlie paid for himself and his partner, in spite of her entreaties. Two of us found the game of whist a profitable thing.

One day a registered letter came for Charlie.

He seized it, carried it to a window, and then called Tita to him. Why need he have made any secret about it? It was nothing but a ring —a plain hoop with a row of rubies.

"Do you think she would take this thing?" he said, in a low voice.

"How can I tell?"

The young man blushed and stammered, and said,

"I don't want you to ask her to take the ring, but to get to know whether she would accept any present from me. And I would ask her myself, plainly, only you have been frightening me so much about being in a hurry. And what am I to do? Three days hence we start."

Tita looked down with a smile and said, rather timidly,

"I think, if I were you, I would speak to her myself—but very gently."

We were going off that morning to a little

lake some dozen miles off, to try for a jack or two. Franziska was coming with us. She was, indeed, already outside, superintending the placing in the trap of our rods and bags. When Charlie went out she said that everything was ready, and presently our peasant-driver cracked his whip, and away we went.

Charlie was a little grave, and could only reply to Tita's fun with an effort. Franziska was mostly anxious about the fishing, and hoped that we might not go so far to find nothing.

We found few fish anyhow. The water was as still as glass and as clear; the pike that would have taken our spinning bits of metal must have been very dull-eyed pike indeed. Tita sat at the bow of the long punt reading, while our boatman steadily and slowly plied his single oar. Franziska was for a time eagerly engaged in watching the progress of our fishing, until even she got tired of the excitement of rolling in an

immense length of cord, only to find that our spinning-bait had hooked a bit of floating wood or weed. At length Charlie proposed that he should go ashore and look out for a picturesque site for our picnic, and he hinted that perhaps Miss Franziska might also like a short walk, to relieve the monotony of the sailing. Miss Franziska said she would be very pleased to do that. We ran them in among the rushes, and put them ashore, and then once more started on our laborious career.

Tita laid down her book. She was a little anxious. Sometimes you could see Charlie and Franziska on the path by the side of the lake, at other times the thick trees by the water's side hid them.

The solitary oar dipped in the lake; the boat glided along the shores. Tita took up her book again. The space of time that passed may be inferred from the fact that, merely as an incident

to it, we managed to catch a chub of four pounds. When the excitement over this event had passed, Tita said,

"We must go back to them. What do they mean by not coming on and telling us? It is most silly of them."

We went back by the same side of the lake, and we found both Franziska and her companion seated on the bank at the precise spot where we had left them. They said it was the best place for the picnic. They asked for the hamper in a business-like way. They pretended they had searched the shores of the lake for miles.

And while Tita and Franziska are unpacking the things, and laying the white cloth smoothly on the grass, and pulling out the bottles for Charlie to cool in the lake, I observe that the younger of the two ladies rather endeavours to keep her left hand out of sight. It is a paltry piece of deception. Are we moles, and blinder

than moles, that we should continually be made the dupes of these women? I say to her,

"Franziska, what is the matter with your left hand?"

"Leave Franziska's left hand alone," says Tita, severely.

"My dear," I reply, humbly, "I am afraid Franziska has hurt her left hand."

At this moment Charlie, having stuck the bottles among the reeds, comes back, and, hearing our talk, he says, in a loud and audacious way,

"Oh! do you mean the ring? It is a pretty little thing I had about me, and Franziska has been good enough to accept it. You can show it to them, Franziska."

Of course he had it about him. Young men always do carry a stock of ruby rings with them when they go fishing, to put in the noses of the fish. I have observed it frequently.

Franziska looks timidly at Tita, and then she raises her hand, that trembles a little. She is about to take the ring off to show it to us, when Charlie interposes:

"You needn't take it off, Franziska."

And with that, somehow, the girl slips away from among us, and Tita is with her, and we don't get a glimpse of either of them until the solitude resounds with our cries for luncheon.

In due time Charlie returned to London, and to Surrey with us in very good spirits. He used to come down very often to see us; and one evening at dinner he disclosed the fact that he was going over to the Black Forest in the following week, although the November nights were chill just then.

"And how long do you remain?"

"A month," he says.

"Madam," I say to the small lady at the other end of the table, "a month from now will bring

us to the 4th of December. You have lost the bet you made last Christmas morning; when will it please you to resign your authority?"

"Oh, bother the bet," says this unscrupulous person.

"But what do you mean?" says Charlie.

"Why," I say to him, "she laid a wager last Christmas Day that you would not be married within a year. And now you say you mean to bring Franziska over on the 4th of December next. Isn't it so?"

"Oh, no!" he says; "we don't get married till the Spring."

You should have heard the burst of low, delightful laughter with which Queen Tita welcomed this announcement. She had won her bet.

III.

A FIGHT FOR A WIFE.

CHAPTER I

THE MEETING.

THE scene of this deadly encounter was neither gloomy nor romantic; it was fair and pastoral; and the time was May; and all the sweet influences of the spring-time were shedding a soft, idyllic sweetness over our English dales. We had with us at this time a young American lady who was on her first visit to the country: and one evening, when various plans were being proposed for her amusement and edification, one of us said to her—

"Now, wouldn't you rather get away from

London, and go straight down into one of our quiet valleys, and see a real old English town that has been slumbering there for many centuries, and is likely to sleep for as many more? You will see a strange old place, with quaint houses of red and white, and here and there a garden between the gables. Then you will go down to the side of a broad and smooth river, flowing by under some beautiful woods. You will live in an old-fashioned inn—called the 'Complete Angler'—and just outside your window you will see the smooth blue river break white over a long weir, and you will see the trees, and lawn, and veranda of the miller's house on the other side; and beyond that again the soft low hills and hanging woods of one of our English counties."

Our young friend was much pleased with the notion; but hesitated. Of course, she said, this quiet and beautiful place must be far away and

difficult to reach. When she was told that it was something less than fifty miles from London, she at once agreed to go; and hence it was that the desperate conflict which I have to describe took place in one of the most peaceful nooks of Berkshire, at a time of the year when the human bosom should have been full, not of angry passions, but of the singing of nightingales.

For this was the secret of it—two men had overheard this proposal; and each of them had inwardly resolved to outwit the other by immediately telegraphing to the "Complete Angler" for rooms, so that he should be installed there when this young lady and ourselves, her guardians for the time, should arrive. One of them was a slender young gentleman, fair-haired, large-eyed, and rather petulant in manner, who had just made some stir in literary circles by the publication of a volume of metaphysical verse; the other was considerably his elder, inclined to be

stout, comely of face, and made welcome among us chiefly by a sort of sly good humour which sometimes led him into saying good things, but in any case and at all times seemed to make him very well contented with himself. This Mr. Humphreys was understood by some to be in a Government office; but no one could ever precisely say what it was, and his duties certainly never interfered with his pleasures. His rival, who had the privilege of being styled by the Court newsman the Honourable Philip Sturmere Maurice, was the youngest son of an impecunious nobleman, and was believed to be waiting for some colonial appointment.

Now, these two men, from the moment that our pretty Amy Newton came among us, began to pay her a series of more or less occult attentions, all in a friendly sort of way, of course, and generally through the small and gentle lady who was her hostess. By this means they could present

her with boxes for the opera, they could lend her new books, they could even offer to escort herself and her two companions to an exhibition of pictures. All this was smooth sailing. Little did we perceive in it the elements of a tragedy. The young lady accepted these marks of friendliness with a sweet impartiality; doubtless they were merely little acts of courtesy extended to a stranger from a distant land.

And of the young American lady herself? Well, she was neither very wise nor very learned; but she was exceedingly pretty, and she had a curiously winning and fascinating manner that drew women as well as men toward her. Perhaps it was the softness of her voice; perhaps it was a kind of piteous look in her dark grey eyes; but anyhow, people liked to get near her, and when they got near her they got interested in her, and when they got interested in her they immediately went and asked everybody else what

was her story. No one present knew. It was supposed to be rather a painful affair—had she not been engaged to be married to a young man who was drowned within sight of shore, Paul and Virginia fashion?—but in any case she always referred to it in a vague way, and apparently wished to keep her sorrow a secret. For the rest, Miss Amy was rather tall and pale; she wore a good many rings, and when she travelled she displayed to the other inhabitants of the railway-carriage a bag filled with all sorts of curiosities in the way of scents and other toilet requisites. One might have laughed at the fashion in which she played with these; only she was so pretty and childlike one had not the heart to laugh at her. She seemed only to pet herself because everybody else petted her.

We drove to Paddington Station. There was a young man there, looking furtively up and down the platform. He came to us and said, with an

amount of confusion in his face that seemed to make him a trifle sulky:

"Oh, are you going into the country? Really! What beautiful weather! I took it suddenly into my head to run down to see Marlow—it must be looking so pretty just now."

Miss Newton said nothing at all, though she seemed surprised; but the small lady beside her—who manages all such things with an infinite tact and discretion—smiled demurely, and remarked:

"What an odd coincidence! We are going to Marlow also. We shall make quite a little party—how very nice!"

When once the awkwardness of the meeting was over, Mr. Maurice was apparently highly delighted with his good fortune; and he did his best all the way down to make himself an agreeable companion, taking care to address himself mostly to the elder lady. You would have fancied that he meant to leave to me all the talk with

our pretty Miss Amy; those young men are so transparently cunning.

Well, we got down at length to the small country station, and here there was a humble carriage in waiting to drive us to the river-side. We passed along through the sweet-smelling fields. We drove through the quaint little town, which was all shining now in the warm light of the evening sun. We passed the church and got down to the bridge, and there before us, on the other side of the stream, stood the old-fashioned inn of red brick amid its trim plots of flowers and shrubs.

"Did you ever see anything more beautiful?" Queen Tita says; and, indeed, it would be difficult to compose a prettier picture than we beheld at this moment—the solitary, quaint, red, old building by the side of the river, the smooth water reflecting the drooping trees, the white line of the weir, and behind all these some rich meadows lead-

ing over to a low rampart of hills, the thick woods on which were burning red in the sunset.

It was, in truth, a peaceful spot, and we drove over the bridge, and round and down to the inn, with something of a notion that here, for a space, we should shut out all the cares and stormy passions of the world, and dream ourselves back into a condition of primeval peace and innocence. We got down from the carriage. The solitary waiter was at the door to receive us. We hoped that we should be the only occupants of the famous old hostelry.

Just at this moment the face of the young gentleman who had come with us was observed to change colour, and a most unchristian gleam of anger shot from his eyes. Who was this blithe and buxom person who, dressed in a fishing-costume of grey, came gaily along the passage, and seemed overwhelmed with amazement and joy at seeing us?

"What!" said he, "can it be possible? Bless my soul, now! What a fortunate thing! But who could have dreamed of meeting you here, of all places in this sinful but delightful world?"

Who, indeed? It has been the lot of the present writer to have been present at dramatic performances in the capitals of various countries, but he has never witnessed a more beautiful piece of acting than that which was performed by a stout and middle-aged gentleman on the threshold of an inn in Berkshire. We were very nearly imposed on. For the moment it almost seemed real. But then our common sense came to the rescue; and we knew that this sly old dog had quietly slipped down here and taken up his quarters in anticipation of our coming, while the most we could hope for was that the green and fertile plains of Berkshire might not be stained with blood before the week was out.

CHAPTER II.

THREATS.

THEY behaved themselves pretty well at dinner. We dined together in the coffee-room, a queer, low-roofed old place, with an abundance of windows looking on the river, and with coloured pictures of the Thames hung round the walls. The only other occupant of the room was an austere and elderly maiden lady, dining all by herself, of whom Mr. Humphreys rather cruelly remarked that, considering the number of leap-years she must have seen, it was curious she had not taken advantage of any one of them. On

this Mr. Maurice rather indignantly retorted that there were certain spectacles which deserved sympathy rather than ridicule; and we all agreed with that sentiment. The incident passed by. No bones were broken.

After dinner we went outside; there was still some warm colour in the sky, and the smooth river caught a faint glow as it stole away under the dark-green trees. The woods were quiet now; in the twilight there was no sound but the soft rushing of the water over the weir; one began to wish that these young people might sing in the gathering darkness, down here by the side of the rushes. They were thinking of other things.

"Of course, Miss Newton," says the taller and younger of the two gentlemen, "you will go for an excursion on the river to-morrow? The fact is, a man I know has put a little toy steamer at my disposal—it is down at Cookham just now

—I could have it up here for you at any hour you chose."

"A steamer!" says our young American friend; "what a shame it would be to bring a steamer into this quiet place!"

The barometer of the young man's face falls ten degrees; that of his rival jumps up a hundred.

"And that isn't the worst of it," says Mr. Humphreys, eagerly. "Oh no, not at all. The joys of a trip in a small river steamer are most multifarious. First you run aground. Then your waves upset a skiff, and the two men in it make use of the most awful language. Then you take off somebody's outrigger. And so on, and so on, until you wish you had never been born; and, indeed, when you go ashore, your own mother wouldn't believe you ever had been, for your identity is completely lost and smothered up in the coal-dust that has been showered on you. No, no, Miss Newton, don't you be a ——. I

mean, don't you go in a river steamer. Now if you really want to enjoy the river, I'll show you how. We shall get a big flat punt and moor it out below the weir, and we shall have luncheon on board, and plenty of books, and a box of water-colours. If you like to sit and read, well. If you like to spin for trout, you can have my line. If you want to sketch, you have all the scenery about you. Now that is how you ought to spend a nice, idling, enjoyable day on the Thames."

Mr. Humphreys was quite pleased with this burst of oratory. "Do you like the picture?" he might have asked, in the words of the romantic Claude Melnotte. And she did like the picture. She said it was charming. She hoped we should have that boat.

"And the water-colours?" said Mr. Maurice, with something of a sneer. "Where do you propose to get them about here?"

"I brought them with me," replied his rival, with a certain majestic calm.

"Oh, do you paint, Mr. Humphreys?" Miss Amy said directly.

"No, Miss Newton, I don't. But I knew that you did, and so I brought the colours."

It was not for a second or two that any of us observed how this unblushing person had tripped. He had brought colours for her. But had he not vowed and sworn that he was never so surprised in his life as when he saw that carriage drive up to the door of the "Complete Angler?"

"Perhaps you brought with you the trout for which Miss Newton is to fish?" said the younger man, with a ghastly grin on his face.

"Oh, dear, no. There are good trout about here."

"Never saw any."

"Perhaps not—not at the end of your own

line anyway. But if you will take the trouble to look through *Land and Water* for April 1873 you will find a description of a trout taken here which turned the scale at six pounds —there!"

"And the happy fisherman?"

"Was your humble servant."

Now, whether this was true or not, no one could say; for files of *Land and Water* are not as common in the country as buttercups. The bold assertion, however, scored one for Mr. Humphreys, and pretty nearly put the finishing touch to his rival's resentment and chagrin. We began to wonder when these two would rush at each other.

"Now, young people," said the lady who looks after us all, "don't keep lounging about the river-side, or you will get chilled. You must all go off for a short walk before bedtime, all except myself. I am going indoors to unpack."

In one moment the young man had darted forward. He would show Miss Newton the shortest way round to the road. Was it not a delightful evening for a stroll?—and how differently situated one was in the country!

Humphreys and I walked after these two, and our light-hearted friend was most uncommonly morose. Sometimes he whistled; but that form of gaiety sounded strangely in the silence of the evening. He had his eyes fixed on the two figures before him, and kept pretty close upon them.

So very still and calm was the evening that we could not but overhear what Miss Amy and her companion were talking about. Perhaps the silence and the strange twilight over the woods had somewhat impressed them; but, at all events, they were speaking in rather a sad way of the occurrences of life, and of the fashion in which hopes sprang up only to be destroyed by a

ruthless fate, and of the sympathy that was so valuable in healing these wounds, and that was so rarely to be met with. Young Maurice had a gentle and pleasant voice; he was talking in an undertone; these two, as they walked together along the quiet country road, looked very like lovers.

My companion whistled another bar of "The Minstrel Boy," and then began to yawn.

"I think I shall go back and have a cigar before going to bed," said he.

"Very well," said I.

"But you don't mean to leave those two walking on by themselves?" said he, sharply. "Why, that long-legged idiot would go stalking on to the crack of doom—till he tumbled over the edge of the universe. Call him back. Does he want to drag the girl to the shores of the German Ocean?"

I called them; they turned and met us; and

there was for a moment a little confusion. Mr. Humphreys was equal to the occasion. He immediately said to her, "Oh, Miss Newton, I want to tell you what you must do about to-morrow," and then, before the poor girl knew where she was, he had walked her off, and deposited the wrathful and fuming Maurice with me. It was a pleasant walk back to the inn—one's companion being a young man whose chief desire was to despatch somebody or other on a voyage to another world.

"Now," said the genial Mr. Humphreys to me that night, when he had lit his second cigar and mixed his parting glass, "now that that spindle-shanked giraffe has gone to bed, I will tell you all that happened as we came back this evening. By Jove, what a sweet and engaging creature that girl is—what a fine thing it would be to have to take her about always—to picture exhibitions, you know, where your friends were

—to dinner-parties, drums, and all that; and then, when you were tired, to take a run down to this quiet little spot and have a good time all by yourselves. She is a little taller than I am, to be sure——"

"I thought you were going to tell me a story."

"Ah, yes. Well, no sooner had we started to walk home than I found that that milk-faced wisp of straw had been making the girl wretched by talking of troubles and misfortune and the sympathy of unhappy people with each other. Now, you know, that ain't my line; and I didn't see the fun of it; and says I to myself, 'Just let's see what this girl is really unhappy about!' You know, not one of you would tell me——"

"Surely it was not our business, even if we had known?"

"'Well,' said I, 'dear Miss Newton, I hear

you have been rather unhappy.' She sighed at this. Then I went on to tell her that it was very impertinent of me to ask about her private affairs, but she must excuse the interest which I, in common with everybody else, felt in her; and would she tell me something of the young gentleman who was lost?"

"Well," said the attentive listener, "if cheek has any buoyancy about it, there's no fear of your drowning."

"Oh, my dear fellow," remarked the complacent gentleman in grey, with a quiet grin on his face, "I know how to treat one of your very sentimental girls. She told me at once. He was her cousin. I said his being drowned must have been a great shock to her: and she said that was so; and yet she didn't seem to make much of it. So I said that people sometimes exaggerated the concern you ought to have in your relations; and that there were cousins and cousins.

She said that was true, almost in a cheerful voice; and admitted that she did not know much about the young man. 'I suppose,' said I, 'that your relatives rather looked forward to your marrying him as a sort of family affair—you know what I mean?' She said that was so, too; and added, 'Poor young man!' Now, I'll tell you honestly I had come by this time not to believe in the depth of her misery about the elegant young gentleman who was supposed to play Paul to her Virginia; and I ventured to hint as much. She was not offended. In fact, she grew quite lively; and was rather inclined to poke fun at my curiosity, which she said was the thing that Americans were blamed for. 'But what was he like?' said I, wanting to see what she really felt about that hero of a sentimental past. Would you believe it—would you believe it, sir?—she never even saw him! Moreover, it wasn't in coming to see her that he was

drowned. Why, bless you, I laughed; then she was hurt, and said that the drowning of anybody was not a thing to be ridiculed; to which I assented with such eagerness that we immediately became very good friends again. Silent sorrows! Why, sir, I will undertake to have her skipping about like a lamb in a couple of days! Regrets, and buried affections, and sympathy!—you won't see much more of that sort of stuff! As for that two yards' length of attenuated dumpling, I will duck him in the river if he tries to stuff her head full of such trash—I will—I will, indeed. Let that young man beware!"

With this the truculent fellow tossed the end of his cigar into the fireplace, just as if he had been heaving his rival into the Thames; and then he went off determined to have a good sleep to prepare him for the great events of the morrow.

CHAPTER III.

THE RIVAL SUITORS.

WAS she conscious of the internecine war which was raging in this peaceful spot, and of which she was obviously the cause? We met the young lady next morning just as she was going down stairs to breakfast. She looked the very impersonation of all gentleness and innocence and good-nature. If angry passions were raging elsewhere, she, at least, preserved a cheerful serenity of mind.

Doubtless these two gentlemen had both got up very early, on the chance of having a little

quiet talk with her if she happened to be taking the morning air. Doubtless, too, they had enjoyed each other's society for an hour or two before breakfast; they were both looking rather impatient when we went down.

"Oh, Miss Newton, may I give you these flowers?" said Mr. Maurice, bringing forward a very pretty little nosegay of wild blossoms, which he had himself culled from the meadows and hedges.

"Thank you very much," said she, and he looked very pleased and proud. "And thank you, too, Mr. Humphreys, for the charming bouquet you sent me this morning. It was so kind of you."

Everybody stared; everybody except that stout and placid Machiavelli, on whose impassive face not even one smile of triumph appeared. But how had he contrived to get and send her a bouquet at such an hour? He must have got

the flowers overnight. He must have lain in wait for the maid, taking up hot water to Miss Newton's room, and bribed her to carry the bouquet and a little message at the same time. Now, a man whose attentions to a young lady begin before breakfast—who sends her a bouquet along with her hot water—means something serious.

"And now, Miss Newton," said this bold person, already asserting a sort of guardianship over her, "what are we to do to-day? Shall we make up a party? The morning is beautiful—the chestnuts, the red hawthorn, the laburnum, all are most lovely,—and as for the river, you will be delighted when you go outside."

Miss Amy made no answer, but looked to us, her proper guardians.

"I am quite sure, Miss Newton," said Mr. Maurice, in a sort of scornful way, "you'll soon get heartily sick of sitting in a fisherman's punt, doing nothing but watching some one else trying

to catch fish that aren't there. I don't believe they've even got here that wooden fish that the landlords in some places moor deep down in the water so as to get people to come and fish for it. I suppose you've heard that fisherman after fisherman comes in and swears the fish made a rush at his fly—more likely in the case of a wooden fish than of a real one, I should say. You've heard what Dr. Johnson——"

"You needn't," said the elder lover, with a sudden fierceness—"you needn't take Miss Newton back to the time of Dr. Johnson for pedantry, stupidity, and rudeness. There is plenty of all three going about in our own day."

Miss Newton looked alarmed, and said gently—

"I shouldn't at all mind looking at some one fishing. I don't know how it is done in English rivers."

"Oh, thank you," said Mr. Humphreys, getting quite cheerful again; "but don't you imagine we

are going to victimize you. Oh, no; what you must see, first of all, is the beautiful scenery about here. We can drive from here to the Duke of Westminster's place at Cliefden, then on to Maidenhead Bridge and Taplow, then on to Burnham Beeches, and back again another way. And I have a waggonette coming at eleven for you."

And at eleven o'clock, sure enough, there was the waggonette standing at the door, and the whole of us submissively went out as if we had been taken possession of by this indefatigable government official. But how were we to sit?

"I say, Maurice," Humphreys remarked, in a careless way, "I think you said you knew the country about here?"

"Oh, very well indeed," said the unsuspecting victim; "I know every inch of it."

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind sitting beside the driver and telling him where he ought

to take us? Wouldn't that be the best way, Miss Newton?"

To appeal to her—it was cruel. She said something very timidly in reply, and the young man, with black rage in his heart, got up beside the driver. When the ladies were not looking Humphreys winked to me; but I could not encourage familiarity on the part of so unscrupulous a person.

Our young friend had certainly a favourable opportunity that morning for making the acquaintance of certain sorts of our English scenery in their most charming aspects. We drove through pleasant country lanes, the hedge-banks of which were brilliant with spring flowers; we passed through tiny villages, and the cottage-gardens were smothered in blossoms; we came upon glimpses of the blue river flowing smoothly through rich meadows which were white with daisies; and then, again, through an

opening in the trees we could see the higher land beyond, with the Cliefden woods, rich with the foliage of the early summer. Miss Amy was indeed delighted; and the driving through the fresh air had brought a colour to her cheeks and a light to her eyes which rendered her more than usually pretty. Then she was most friendly with Mr. Humphreys; for somehow or other he had put the notion into her head that all this was his doing, and she was grateful to him for every beautiful thing she saw. You would have thought he had planted those red chestnut trees (three hundred years before) in anticipation of her coming.

"And really, Miss Newton, you must not go away from England without seeing far more of it. Why should you go with your parents to Paris? Your other two sisters are quite sufficient society for them. Paris! It is the most miserable city in the world to spend a holiday

in. The white glare and heat of the streets will blind you. You will lose all the health you have acquired here, and begin to get headaches, and feel drowsy, and disgusted with the whole of creation. Now, how long did you say your parents meant to stay in Paris before going back to America?"

"Three months."

"Then," said he, promptly, "you stay with our good friends here for that time. They will be delighted to have you, I know; and by and by they will be going down into Surrey, where you will see quite another sort of scenery, and see something of our English country life. You will, won't you?"

The audacity of this person was remarkable. Of course we had to press Miss Amy to stay; and although we did so honestly, one generally wishes to have one's offers of hospitality proceed from oneself. However, Mr. Humphreys

seemed calmly to ignore all such little prejudices. He told Miss Newton what she could expect by giving up the trip to Paris and staying with us. He gave her a description of Box Hill and Mickleham Downs which would have been worthy of the poet Thomson or of George Robins the auctioneer. The girl, of course, could not promise; but she was apparently well inclined toward the proposal, and said she would see what her parents said when they came back from Edinburgh. All this, be it observed, was overheard by the young man sitting up in front; what he thought of it can only be imagined, for he maintained a morose and rigid silence.

"You see, my dear Miss Newton," remarked our gay friend, "you must do unto others as you would be done by. Now I mean to give America three full months——"

"Oh, are you coming over?" the girl said, her whole face inadvertently lighting up.

"Oh, yes," he answered in his off-hand way. "I have long purposed it. Now I shall do it —in the autumn. When do you say your papa will probably be going back?"

"About the beginning of September," she said; and then she added quite unguardedly, "and what a pleasant thing it would be if we happened to find you in the same steamer!"

"Well," said he, sagely, "I have generally found that a man should never leave such things to chance. It is better to play the good genius for yourself. Accordingly, I think that if you go over to America in the beginning of September, and if you would kindly let me know the name of the steamer, you may pretty confidently reckon on finding me—you may call it by chance, if you like—among the passengers."

"Oh, and we could introduce you to so many nice people—mamma would be most delighted

to do so. But do you really mean to go over?"

"I give you my word of honour," said he, "that if you will tell me what steamer you go back to America by I shall go by that steamer too, and take a three months' holiday in the States. Is that explicit? or shall I put the terms of the contract in writing?"

Now an extraordinary incident occurred at this moment. Humphreys, with an amiable smile on his face, suddenly called out—

"I say, Maurice, it must be uncommonly slow for you up there. Come on in here, and I'll change places with you."

Could a more courteous offer have been made? The young man refused sulkily. Then he was pressed; and at last he consented. Mr. Humphreys got up beside the driver; and presently we heard him begin to chaff that serious person in a fashion which brought many a smile

to Miss Amy's lips. She was evidently listening more to him than to us.

We drove up and through the beautiful woods of Cliefden, the birds singing all around us, the white clouds sailing through the blue overhead. We drove on to Burnham Beeches, and there, in the midst of the forest, saw the great gnarled and twisted grey trunks, to which even the least imaginative of Londoners make pious pilgrimages. We drove back to Maidenhead Bridge, and had luncheon at the inn there, and went down to the river and wandered about for an hour; then we got into the waggonette again and set out for Marlow. All this time the most patient and winning efforts of Queen Tita were ineffectual in smoothing down the savage feelings of the young man who sat beside us.

"There is nothing," he said to Miss Amy, "which vexes me so much as a show of coarse joviality and ploughboy wit when one is in the

midst of beautiful scenery. A day like this reminds you of many things you had half forgotten; and when these associations are present to the mind, painful and sad as many of them may be, it is not pleasant to be shocked by an impertinent jocularity. Don't you think so?"

"But why should a pretty piece of country make you sad?" she said, quite naturally and cheerfully. "It ought to raise one's spirits."

He said no more after that; and indeed a silent person is apt to be overlooked if he have four companions all sufficiently talkative. That young man was losing ground.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHALLENGE.

WHEN we got back to Marlow the two ladies went indoors; we three strolled round to the meadows by the side of the river. I did not at all like the look of the young man's face: there was mischief brooding.

"I suppose," said he to me, in rather a loud and ostentatious fashion, "that Miss Newton is under your care?"

"She is for the present."

"And how do you like," he continued, in the same loud fashion, "her making an assignation

to be accompanied to America by a gentleman who has only been casually introduced to her parents, and of whom neither she nor they know anything?"

"If you mean me, young gentleman," said Mr. Humphreys, ceasing to whistle "Love's Young Dream," "I'd advise you to be a little more respectful."

"Age commands respect, certainly," said the younger man, with an unmistakable sneer.

"Yes, and schoolboys, when they don't show it, get whipped," remarked the other, beginning to whistle again.

"I'll tell you what it is," exclaimed Maurice, turning fiercely round, "I'll tell you what my opinion is, that a man who tries to entrap a young girl into a clandestine appointment, and without the knowledge of her parents, and he old enough to be her father, is no better than a cad—I said cad, sir."

"Oh, did you? Did you, really?" said Mr. Humphreys.

Now, there is an operation which, in the vulgar tongue, is known as "ballooning," and which consists in seizing a person from behind by the collar of his coat and by another portion of his attire, and driving him on before you. A person who is thus "ballooned" is very helpless; he may squeal, or use bad language, or try to kick, but on he must go. Well, no sooner had Mr. Maurice uttered these last words than Mr. Humphreys immediately laid hold of him in the manner above described, and began to run him down the slope of the meadows to the side of the river. The younger man did squeal—with absolute rage—he did use bad language, and with might and main struggled to get free. His enemy —with a shout of demoniacal laughter which rang through the place—held him firm and drove him right down to the stream. The whole affair

had taken place so quickly that there was no chance of interference, and it was all over in a second.

For, as it happened, there was a log of wood lying concealed among the grass by the river's side; Maurice, tripping over it, stumbled and fell headlong into the water; while Humphreys, stumbling also, but having proper warning, fell, but managed to save himself from going into the stream. The next minute Maurice had scrambled out again through the rushes, dripping from head to heel, and trying to get his wet hair out of his eyes. His hat was quietly floating down the Thames.

His rival stood firm. I fully expected to be the unwilling witness of a combat like that which the lover of Helen of Kirkconnell describes when, by the river's side, he drew his sword and hacked his rival "in pieces sma'." But the young man was a wise young man; and who can fight with

one's eyes blinded, and one's garments heavy with water?

"You shall hear from me within an hour," said he, ominously, as he made for the garden of the inn, by which way he had hoped to get in, unperceived, to the house.

Then ensued a strange and wild scene. The elderly gentleman tossed his wide-awake into the air. He caught it coming down, and kicked it a dozen yards out into the long grass. Then, with his hands in the air, he performed a savage dance of joy, snapping his fingers, and calling out:

"How hath the cheeky fallen! He hath been overcome and vanquished, utterly smote out and annihilated, scrunched up, and knocked into everlasting smithereens. My dear friend, shall we have a drink on the strength of this? 'Tis now the witching hour of half-past six, when he who loves his dinner might have a tiny glass of sherry and bitters—*nicht wahr?*"

His friend took a more sober view of the situation.

"The best thing you can do, Humphreys, is to compose your nerves with something else than sherry. You'll have to fight that young man as soon as he gets dry clothes on—you may as well make up your mind to it."

"And who's afraid?" said he. "Who's afraid of that sand-coloured bell-rope—that elongated pelican—that indefinite length of Sydenham trousers and shirt collar? Bah! I will explode him into the primeval elements; I will twist him round the trunk of a tree, and people will mistake him in the morning for a snake that has died of a bilious attack."

CHAPTER V.

THE DUEL.

IN a very short space of time young Maurice came out again, dressed in another suit of clothes. He went past us rapidly without speaking. We saw him cross the bridge and go into the town.

"Now, what is he up to?" said Mr. Humphreys, a trifle more serious.

"He is either gone to get a policeman to give you in charge for assault, or to get a pair of pistols at an ironmonger's."

"Pistols!" said Mr. Humphreys, contemptuously; "that would be like the lunatic."

And it was; for a few moments after Mr. Maurice returned, and coming up to his rival, firmly and courteously informed him that he meant to fight him; that he did not think he would have a fair chance in a vulgar boxing-match, but that he had bought a pair of pistols with which they could settle their quarrel in the adjoining meadow. Mr. Humphreys listened with a laugh on his face; then he saw that it was no good making a joke about it, and finally, stung by a chance remark of his opponent, he said, "All right; come along!"

Now, what was the third person who was the spectator of all this folly to do? The whole affair seemed so incredible that to call anyone's attention to it might have been compromising; and yet, to all appearances, these two were really going down to the side of the river to load these pistols and fire them at each other.

"I thought," said I, to them both, "that when

gentlemen in France went out to fire half-loaded weapons at each other they generally took with them a doctor to make believe the thing was serious. Don't you mean to have a doctor, or any seconds, or any reporter to send a romantic account to the *Figaro?*"

"We shall do very well by ourselves," said the younger man; and the two imbeciles walked off.

There remained but one thing for me to do. In a certain chamber in that old-fashioned inn there was a lady dressing for dinner; and when she is finally arranging the flowers in her hair she does not like to be disturbed. However, when I represented to her the deadly schemes of those two people whom we could see walking down to the meadow, she quite forgot the last yellow rosebud and caught at a light shawl which she threw round her head and shoulders.

"Shall we tell them the truth?" said Tita.

"What truth?" said I; "only, whatever truth you have to tell them, you'd better look sharp."

What a placid evening was shining all round when we hastened down to the river—the sweet-brier of the garden scenting the air, and the beautiful tints in the sky showing on the clear bosom of the Thames! We could see those two black figures down by the tall green rushes. They had apparently settled the preliminaries, and were now some dozen yards apart.

"They see us now—oh, the two gabies!" said my companion.

The notion of bringing a lady on the scene was obviously successful; one could see each of them smuggling something away into his coat-pocket. When we arrived on the spot they were evidently contemplating the beauty of the scenery; while Mr. Humphreys, with a charming carelessness, asked us if we had seen the

rush of young fish to the surface—obviously getting out of the way of a pike.

"No, I did not," said Queen Tita, with a gracious smile. "I have been too busy thinking how I should scold you two gentlemen. What do you mean by going away by yourselves in this manner, instead of waiting in the garden until Miss Newton came down? You ought to pay her every attention while she is our guest; otherwise she will not think much of our English people, and she will have a bad account of us to give to Mr. St. Vincent."

"Mr. St. Vincent?" they both repeated mechanically.

"Yes," was the innocent answer; "the gentleman whom she is to marry as soon as she returns home."

There was a strange pause. Mr. Humphreys began to stare about and whistle. The other gentleman looked uncomfortable, and blushed hotly.

"But I shall forgive you if you come back to the inn at once," said their gentle monitress; "and indeed dinner will be waiting for us in twenty minutes. You won't mind my running back by myself?"

When she had gone the two men looked at each other for a moment, and then young Maurice, with a contemptuous smile, tossed his pistol in among the reeds. Another splash told us that the second weapon had followed it. Then they stood and looked at each other again.

"Look here, old chap," the elder gentleman said in a bland fashion, "there isn't much use in making a fuss about this. I beg your pardon for any awkward little thing that may have occurred. When a man is made a fool of by a woman he's not responsible for his actions—what do you think?"

"I quite think so," said the other; and they shook hands amicably.

Next morning our two friends discovered that urgent business called them away to London, and they left us with many expressions of regret. It was remarked, moreover, by a certain gentle-eyed young lady, that no reference had been made to that compact about a trip to the United States.

IV.

THE TRUE LEGEND OF A BILLIARD CLUB.

CHAPTER I.

A DANGEROUS MISSION.

WHAT a strange commotion has prevailed in the house all day!—servants hurrying hither and thither, young people nailing up elaborate devices in ivy and holly, mysterious packages from town being opened, and even hampers of borrowed silver and crystal coming in from our neighbours across the Downs. It reminds one of the noise and bustle that reign in a theatre when the last rehearsals of a pantomime are being pushed forward; and our stage manager—she is about five feet three, with a Tower of Babel on her

head, and a white rose near her neck—keeps whipping about from room to room, making everybody fly before her, as if she were a combination of several whirlwinds. But when she comes into this particular room, it is to be observed that there is on her face a subdued expression of triumph and revenge, which is not in consonance with wifely sentiment.

"Will it please your Most Gracious Majesty" —this is the way in which it is safest to address Queen Tita when she is in a hurry—"to tell me how much wine you women and children are likely to drink to-morrow night?"

"As there are to be no gentlemen of the party," she says, with perfect sweetness, "I think you need not fear leaving us the key of the cellar."

She is off again in a moment. It is always the way with those women. Before you have your answer ready (and, of course, you wish to give it due consideration, lest it should cause

pain) they are round the corner, through the hall, and pretending to count bon-bons on the dining-room sideboard. This particular young person never admits that she says anything rude, or impertinent, or calculated to annoy; but somehow, just after uttering a little sentence or two, she has a trick of disappearing suddenly, leaving the conversation to be continued in our next. What could anyone say to the insinuation about the wine consumed by one's gentlemen friends at dinner?

And here it may be necessary to explain why, with all these preparations going forward, our party to-morrow is to consist exclusively of women and children. 'Tis a sad story, but it shall be told without concealment or extenuation. We are a small community down here in Surrey, consisting of half-a-dozen families, and pretty well thrown in upon ourselves for amusement and social recreation. We dine at each other's houses;

we listen to each other's wives singing all the well-known songs over again; we fall asleep in the drawing-room; and are then woke up to be driven home to bed. This form of existence is highly moral and proper; but it is not exciting. In the summer-time, of course, we have our walks by the side of the Mole—a stream whose calm and gentle current admirably typifies the life of those who live on its banks—or we can go up on the Downs, or even muster courage to ascend Box Hill. But on these winter evenings one begins to tire of the pattern of the paper in one's friends' drawing-rooms. You wish that the lady who complains that she cannot sing the old songs would give over trying. The pulse refuses to be stirred even with the excitement of playing vingt-et-un for counters at a shilling a gross. Stereoscopes, backgammon, photographs, all the old devices—vanity, vanity, nothing but vanity. As for conversation, it is impossible to get beyond

gabble, except when the Major grows angry over the fate of Arthur Orton.

This had been going on for a long time when an evil notion entered into the heart of one of us husbands, who forthwith proposed that we should have a billiard-table bought and sent down from London. Oddly enough, not one of us possessed that indispensable addition to a country-house. This same tempter also proposed that, as it would be unfair to our wives that we should always be playing billiards after dinner, two nights in the week, Monday and Thursday, should be set apart for the purpose. No sooner was the scheme mooted than it was adopted. The details were settled off-hand. The Major offered us a large unoccupied room over his coachhouse; we were to club together for the cost of the table, the fittings, and lamps. And just as some little compensation to our wives, and so as not to be away from them the whole evening, we were

to give dinners in turn on those two evenings, the women would be left together while we drove up to the Major's, and, of course, we should be back in time to take them home. In return for his other good offices, the Major, who was the only unmarried man in the plot, was to be let off that dinner when it came to his turn.

All this was satisfactorily settled one evening over our cigars; and then some one airily asked who would explain the project to the inhabitants of the drawing-room when we went in there.

Each looked at the other, as if such a trifling duty might be undertaken by anybody. Nobody volunteered. Then the gentleman who is known in the neighbourhood as the Squire, and who is portly of person and red of face, suggested that the youngest of us, being most likely to propitiate the ladies, should be our ambassador.

The youngest of us happens to be a Prussian gentleman, who certainly exhibits no cowardice

when he is out with the hounds; but on this occasion he showed an amount of fright that was painful to contemplate. He begged to be let off. He could not explain. His English was not ready enough if he got into a difficulty; but would not the Major now——?

At this, we all agreed that the Major should undertake the duty. Of course he ought. We were so much indebted to him already; and this would put the climax on his services. The Major, who is a very small, thin man, with white hair and moustache, pulled up his shirt-collar, and looked very stiff. From that moment he maintained a dead silence until we went into the drawing-room.

A more ghastly exhibition than the pretended hilarity of this old man, when he was addressing these five women, I have never witnessed. He tried to persuade them that it was for their amusement that the billiard-table was to be

brought down; and he jocularly asked them whether they would not on the whole prefer to be left by themselves on these two evenings, to hear the news from each other without disturbance. But the more he perceived that they did not enter into the spirit of the joke the redder his face grew; and he might have incurred apoplexy in his embarrassment had not the youngest of the wives—the whole of us are secretly in love with her, but no matter—suddenly called out,

"Oh, you wicked creatures! who put such a notion into your heads?"

You may be sure it was an ingenious young thing who uttered such an exclamation. The other wives—older hands all of them—were far more diplomatic. When the first stare of astonishment was over, they pretended to be vastly interested in the project. Was it the Major who was going to give the billiard-table house-room?

How kind of the Major! There was no real reason, they supposed, why the game of billiards should be associated with pot-houses, gambling, and low persons? Doubtless that was merely a vulgar prejudice. People frequently quarrelled over billiards, did they not? Perhaps that was an exaggeration.

So far, well. The less experienced of the married men thought the difficulty had been got over beautifully; and the Major was very proud of the success of his eloquence. He hastened to assure the ladies that there was no reason whatsoever why they should not occasionally come and see us play, if only they did not mind the fumes of the lamps and the tobacco. They might even, if they chose, teach themselves to play pool, if they were not afraid to lose a few shillings. All this courtesy on the Major's part was apparently amply returned. They paid him every attention; they almost seemed delighted with the proposal.

But one or two of us, having some experience, feared this unnatural calmness. The weather was too fine; presently the little cloud would arise at the horizon.

CHAPTER II.

A CONSPIRACY OF WIVES.

THESE forebodings were speedily and fearfully realized; but in the meanwhile everything went smoothly. The big bare chamber up at the Major's was painted and decorated; hot-water pipes put in; a few pictures contributed by the rest of us; and in due course the table arrived from London, was screwed up, and made ready for use. It was really a very comfortable room; and we had a long couch placed on a platform at the upper end, so that if any fair ladies came to see the tournament they should be beyond

reach of the cues. It now only remained to fix the first day for beginning; and the Squire volunteered to have the first dinner at his house.

Next day, however, a sinister rumour got abroad. Some one had met the Squire riding over to Epsom, and he was in a terrible rage, and swore that women were the plague of creation. It seems that when he announced his intention of having the dinner at his house, his wife replied calmly that she was very sorry, but she had already accepted an invitation to run down for a couple of days, just at that time, to see her grandmother at Brighton. It was a pity, certainly; but we said the Squire would have his turn come round again.

What, however, was the matter with the women? Every one of them had an engagement for that Monday night. Then we began to see how matters lay. We were to be made the victims of a CONSPIRACY.

Should we submit to it? Never! The Squire made use of language that would have made you fancy some one had shot a fox, in declaring that he would not yield to such tyranny. It was too bad. These women expected too much. Were we doomed for ever to fall asleep in easy-chairs after dinner, listening to idle chatter, and the indifferent singing of idiotic songs? He called their singing caterwauling. Some of us, who are rather proud of the singing of our wives, rather resented that term. But then the Squire was in a rage; and vowed that he would endure this sort of thing no longer. Then he asked why the Major had not explained the matter fully, so as to show those women that no harm was intended?

The Major is rather a timid person; and obviously got into a fright on finding himself between two fires. He had driven off the women, and was now confronted by the men. In eager

haste he said there would be no difficulty about the matter; he would give us a dinner; his housekeeper would manage very well, and then we could inaugurate our Billiard Club. We were of course all too brave to refuse this challenge. It had come to our ears that, in the event of our dining on that Monday night anywhere but in our respective houses, the whole of the women had resolved to flock to one particular house, and dine by themselves.

Let them, we said! Better an open fight than the grudge of an ignoble servitude! Injustice grows apace, and tyranny is never satisfied. We cheered each other with heroic sentiments; we were more than ever friendly among ourselves; Spartans as we were, we would hold this Thermopylæ against all comers, our lives and liberty being the stake.

The fatal Monday night came round, and from each of these five houses arrived a solitary indi-

vidual, scarcely knowing whether or not to take the thing *au grand sérieux*, but feeling just a little uncomfortable. The women had entered into a compact amongst themselves to utter no word of protest. They would let us do just as we particularly pleased. While apparent confidence reigned in every household, on that one subject a solemn silence prevailed; so that it was quite impossible to explain. When you began to say that it was really a little unreasonable that so ordinary a thing as a game at billiards should be made a bone of contention, Five-Feet-Three would look up with a studied innocence in her big grey eyes, and ask you what you meant. A bone of contention?—there was no such thing. Of course, if we wanted to go and play billiards, we might do so. And then there would be a toss of the head, very perilous to the Tower of Babel on it; and Five-Feet-Three would walk off with much dignity; only that, in throwing a

paper-knife on the table, why should it be flung down as if it had been trying to sting?

We had an excellent dinner at the Major's; and we vied with each other in expressing approval of the comfort of the arrangement. This was an example of what could be done by a good housekeeper. Could we have had as good a dinner at home? Certainly not! And where have you a chance of entertaining an agreeable little party of bachelors, if there's always a woman in the house who insists on sitting at the head of the table, who stops all the pleasant stories, and half expects you to incline your heads whenever the name of a bishop is mentioned?

Then we went to the billiard-room, and merely to prove the absolute innocence of the thing, we played pool with penny lives and threepence the game, that is to say, if you lost all your lives and took none you could only lose sixpence

each game; but whether there was not a private arrangement here and there—an odd sovereign staked against a particular three lives by the owner of another three—why that is a quite different and a private matter. It must be repeated that we played penny lives and threepence the game.

We finished by midnight, and then, before parting, some one asked what was to be done about the following Thursday. Oddly enough, no one volunteered to give that dinner which was to precede our adjournment to the billiard-room. In fact, it was broadly hinted that these five women would brave it out, and profess to have engagements on that evening also, and once more leave us to do what we particularly pleased.

"No," says one of us, "you do not think that? I am sure they will not be so foolish. It is we who are foolish, yes! that we do not try to persuade them."

The belief which that young Prussian has in the gentleness and good faith of women is amusing at times; but at other times it is positively irritating. If he was so sure that the women could be persuaded, why did he not offer to get his own wife to give us the dinner? She has not been married a couple of years, and may have some trace of docility and obedience left.

CHAPTER III.

THE RETORT COURTEOUS.

THE end of this was, to cut a long story short, that we found those women resolved never to preside over a dinner party in their own house, or to have anything whatever to do with it, so long as it was meant to be the preface to an evening at billiards. They made no other protest against our club; they simply would not recognize its existence. Well, what was left for us? I dare say some of those who have read these lines so far will at once answer that we ought directly to have secured peace and quietness by abandoning that wretched billiard-table. But perhaps my

gentle reader has not lived on the banks of the Mole? It is all very well to abjure billiards and other evil devices when you are in London, when you can dine with different people from night to night, when you can go to theatres, the opera, concerts, and spiritualist *séances*. But what if you have to dine with the same set of people until you hate the sight of them? When you know the covert praises that will come out with that confounded Madeira, which must have made one voyage from the Cape because it was grown there? When one can't even go to sleep because of stormy battle-pieces played by the eldest daughter of the house, and of repeated appeals addressed by a lady at sea to a dove that is supposed to be perched on a rigging? "Gad, sir!" whispered the Squire one night, "if I could only find that pigeon flying about my lawn, and if I had a cartridge handy, I'd stop that woman's screeching for the brute pretty quick."

Moreover, if we surrendered on this point, where were we to stop? Should we by and by have to turn our breechloaders into fire-irons, and give up our driving-gloves to let the servants scour the same? Nothing could be more unreasonable than their conduct about the billiard-table; and if they were allowed to begin in this way, what would be the end of it? All these things were pointed out at a Council of War, held after dinner one evening; and the result was that we each and all pledged ourselves to a No Surrender policy.

"It is they who are in the wrong; let them give in," said one, boldly—he seldom spoke with so much confidence in the presence of his wife.

"But if they are in the wrong, they will find it all the more difficult to give in—yes, that is certain," observed the young Prussian fellow, with a sigh. You see, he was married but a year and a half ago.

"Well, gentlemen," said the Major, "I have no wish to interfere with the affairs of married people. I may be wrong, but I consider myself fortunate in being free from all cares of that sort."

"Hear, hear," said everybody.

"In any case, I do not wish to mix myself up with matrimonial squabbles, as I say. But, gentlemen, the duties of hospitality devolve upon me none the less. I can promise you that, as long as you like to come here of an evening, I'll give you as good a dinner as my cook can get for you; and I can't do any more. And with it you'll get a hearty welcome. But what I should like to impress on you is this, that it might be better—in fact, I should greatly prefer it—the truth is, it would be a great obligation conferred on me if you would conceal the fact that this proposal came from me. You see I have the pleasure of knowing these ladies only

as a friend or acquaintance. You can make up your quarrels with them; but if they fall out with me, what am I to do?"

At this point a whole storm of explanations burst forth. The Major was assured that all the ladies spoke of him in the highest possible terms. If he only knew what they said of him he would be vastly pleased; but, of course, there were things that couldn't be said to a man's face. He was quite right, too, in wishing to have his share in the matter kept dark. It was the least return we could give him for his kindness; and the only thing that was inadmissible was, that the Major should defray the cost of these big dinners. If the Major didn't mind, why should we not club in some manner for the dinner, as we had done for the billiard-table?

Let the married ladies who may read this true story ponder over this passage of it. They will

see what mischief may arise from an ill-judged opposition to social and conjugal liberty. Here were five husbands and a bachelor, who merely meant to have an occasional game at billiards: opposition was driving them into the formation of a CLUB.

Was it not apparent moreover on the face of it that other married men around us would soon hear of this bi-weekly Club dinner, and seek to join it? Then, as our numbers increased, we should have to find extended premises, and relieve the Major, so that we should end in building a Club-house. Then we should have a secretary, a steward, a French cook, and a staff of servants; we should have billiard-rooms, smoking-rooms, card-rooms, and what not; we should gradually get to regard the place as a second and more comfortable home, where a man might read his "Quarterly" in peace, and have no bother about household arrangements.

It was all the fault of those five women. On each succeeding billiard night they dined by themselves; and we, whether around the Major's table, or up in the billiard-room, knew that these mistaken creatures were profoundly miserable. The little devices they used afterwards to persuade us that they had enjoyed themselves were wretched failures. They took to composing elaborate little *menus*, and of course, by mere accident, one of these was sure to fall in our way. But didn't we know very well that women don't care for fine cookery, except to surprise each other, or gratify their guests? Of what use was it to invent names (always in ill-spelt French) for dishes which were as Dead Sea apples to them? They even went the length of putting down with each course its appropriate wine! Why, we knew that not one of the lot of them could tell the difference between Chablis and Sauterne; and that their opinions on the

subject of Champagne were simply chaos so soon as they wandered away from the safe and sweet anchorage of a Roederer label.

But the worst was to come. One Sunday morning a few of us met together on coming out of church, and were shaking hands and talking in a promiscuous heap. Suddenly the person whom we may call Queen Tita said to the youngest of all the wives——

"Oh, B., do you know that Christmas this year falls on a Thursday?"

Now the little woman, though she was laughing, meant no harm. Of course none of us intended to spend Christmas evening, Thursday or no Thursday, in playing billiards. But this same B., being a young and gentle thing, was a little frightened, and looked in an anxious manner to her husband.

He, in his turn, not caring to speak for all the husbands (he is a Prussian and nervous about

his English), looked in rather an appealing fashion to the Squire.

The Squire, being a little flustered by the announcement, instinctively turned to his wife.

Now the Squire's wife is a most deplorable woman.

"Oh, Thursday is it?" she said, suddenly firing up. "And I suppose they mean to play billiards? Well, let them! They have forsaken their homes and families long enough—we have got accustomed to it—let them play billiards, by all means."

I don't know what an *obus* is, but, if it is anything worse than a bomb-shell, it was an *obus* that this unhappy woman exploded in our midst on that morning. For she forthwith appealed to her fellow conspirators; and they, challenged in public, could not well turn traitor. They said, in a cold and polite manner, that they would not seek to limit our pleasures. They could

manage very well by themselves. Christmas night was chiefly devoted to children; and children were doubtless tiresome and uninteresting to gentlemen who preferred bachelor dinners and billiards.

Thus, you see, we were thrown into opposition whether we liked it or no. They simply occupied the Treasury Bench; and left us to choose whether we should sit down opposite them or walk out. In the end, this conduct seemed to us so monstrous, outrageous, and unreasonable, that we resolved to take them at their word, and let them have it their own way. We should on Christmas night dine at the Major's as usual. Whether we played billiards or not was none of their business.

CHAPTER IV.

"NOUS SOMMES TRAHIS!"

AND so it has come about that on this Christmas-eve I find myself amid a heap of preparations for a banquet, at which these miserable women and all their children are to be present. No wonder there should be some bustle about getting ready our modest rooms to entertain such a multitude; but under that Tower of Babel there lies a brain ready to cope with any difficulties. The talk of the neighbourhood is that if the owner of it had been by the side of Marshal Bazaine in Metz, she would have got the French

through the German lines in a twinkling; but this opinion is stoutly combated by a friend of hers, who married a Prussian officer, and who fancies you are not fit to argue with a door-post if you believe for a moment that the French could have got through by any means whatsoever. This young lady is at present helping forward all these preparations, although she is sadly hampered by the children, especially when there is a bit of mistletoe about. There is one boy of ten who swears that he means to challenge that Prussian, and kill him, and marry his widow. The widow of the future pays little heed; but continues polishing up the American apples, and sometimes hums to herself, "*Mädele, ruck, ruck, ruck.*"

And indeed there is something so gentle and confiding about this young person's look—I repeat that she has only been married about eighteen months—that, as she comes into the room, I

venture to inform her that I cannot understand what mystery is on foot. Why should she, too, smile in a covert manner when there is any talk about our guests of the following evening? B. stops and looks timid for a moment; and then her eyes, that are as blue as the heart of a bell-flower, suddenly grow very friendly. Can I keep a secret? I answer that, although no woman, I can try.

"Then," she says, "you must know that something very wonderful is to occur to-morrow night; and although you were to be the last to be told, I may as well tell you now. For first of all Tita went to the Major the other day, and had a little quiet talk with him. She said he had done us poor women a great deal of mischief; but there was one way he might atone for everything. We should have no one to carve for us on Christmas evening; would he come and do that, so that we might have one gentleman among us

to do the heavy work and keep order among the young people? And this was only to be done if he kept the matter a profound secret from all you gentlemen, and made some excuse to you for his absence. Of course the Major was very much shocked. He represented that he was your host. But then, you know, my Lady has a very persuasive way with her; and she said that, when once you were all assembled, he might send you a note saying he could not come, and that you would not mind his being away if the dinner was a good one. So at last the Major consented."

"The traitor! But there are some women, B., who have no regard for a man's honour."

My charming young friend, however, lets out by degrees that the Major's defection was only the beginning. It was like the letting-in of waters. The goodly company of the Round Table—perhaps the Oblong Table would more

accurately describe our club — was to be torn asunder by this woman's arts.

The next victim, as I learn, was B.'s own husband. Tita went to the young man; and in a very pathetic manner pointed out to him that she had done him good service at one time — in point of fact, when he was courting, and any services done at that time young men don't easily forget. He admitted that; and looked silly and submissive at once. Might she then reckon on him to leave aside that bachelor-dinner on Christmas night, and come and help to enliven the party of young people who had only women to amuse them? He was rather staggered at first, I hear. But then Tita can put a wonderful amount of entreaty into her eyes; and at length he, too, resolved to desert us, and agreed to keep his intention of doing so a profound secret.

"The perfidious renegade!" I cannot help exclaiming; but at this point B. suddenly bridles

up, and stares and looks as if she would like to have it out with any folks that spoke ill of her husband—one down, the other come on. Clearly the little business of the billiard-table has not affected her allegiance to that very cool-mannered young Prussian. But he never was much good at billiards; he will be of more use lighting up Christmas trees and kissing school girls under the mistletoe.

"Wait a bit," says B., with a lofty air; "you call these two traitors? If to be loyal means that you must stay away from your own families on Christmas night, and seek to revenge yourselves on them by amusing yourselves in a disgraceful manner, then let me say that there is not a loyal member amongst you. Every one except yourself, has pledged himself to be of our party to-morrow evening; and each one thinks he is the only gentleman who is to be present."

"And how did she win over the Squire?" I presume to ask, somewhat humbled by this revelation of weakness.

"Flattery," says B., contemptuously. "The easiest thing in the world. She went and told him that we could not do without him. She said she was sure *he* did not care for billiards; and that the others, not he, were only moved by spite. She asked him if he would bring down the two tumblers, and do that shilling trick, which nobody can discover. Oh, I can assure you, he was the easiest to manage of the lot! And so, now that they are all coming to-morrow evening, each thinking he is going to cheat all the others—just like the King of Navarre and his courtiers, you know—what do *you* mean to do? You won't desert us? Tita has had all the honour and glory of persuading those other five; won't you give me the triumph of persuading you?"

That is a pretty question to be asked on this gloomy Christmas-eve. I answer her in this wise :—

> "For now the Oblong Table is dissolved ;
> And I, the last, go forth companionless,
> And the days darken round me, and the years,
> Among new men, strange faces, other minds."

"You won't do that," says B., plaintively. "If you go up to London and dine at your club, the waiters will think you are mad. But on the other hand, if you dine with us, you will be at the head of the table when each of those gentlemen comes in to stare at the others. Oh, what fun there will be when the Squire finds the Major in before him, or the Major stumbles against Dr. Burke in the hall!"

"Go away," I say to her. "This is no subject for idle levity,

> "The sequel of to-day unsolders all
> The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
> Whereof this world holds record."

And why? Because they have been trapped, tricked, betrayed by a mite, a fourpenny-bit of a woman, a creature who could scarcely weigh down a bag of almonds and raisins in a weighing-machine."

"Meaning me," says a third voice, in a mocking way. These women are devoid of sentiment.

"Yes, Madam, you have plotted and conspired to bring ridicule on persons whose grey hairs you should have respected. But a time may come. That billiard-table has not been split up for firewood yet. The balls are not hung up as ornaments on your Christmas tree. Would you like the cues for fairy wands in the sham pantomime you are getting up?"

"I should," Queen Tita says, coolly.

"You shan't have them. It may be—I do not know—that these weak-minded traitors and renegades may appear to-morrow evening, to incur the humiliation which they richly deserve. But

there is one of them, Madam, who declines to play the part of pantaloon——"

"Not if I play columbine?" B. says, very meekly; and then, of course, all the fight is over.

The hurry and bustle begin again—all through the house there is a hammering of tacks, and a clinking of silver, and the rustling of long strings of ivy-leaves that the children are handing up to be nailed along the walls. The imaginative mind may perceive in these decorations some resemblance to the rosettes of ribbon that are stuck on pigs and other animals slaughtered for Christmas festivities. To-morrow evening the victims will walk in—one by one, doubtless in solemn silence. They will know that they have been betrayed into the loss of their liberty, and that all protest is useless.

And who is to act as chief priest in these cruel rites? At this moment, if you look through

the chink of a particular door, you will catch a glimpse of a young woman who is standing on a table and reaching up to the topmost twig of a fir-tree something taller than herself. She is attended by but one small boy of ten; the other children are not allowed to enter this secret chamber. On the table at her feet is a wild and confused mass of strange and highly-coloured objects—wax candles of red and green, bonbons resplendent in gelatine and gold, seal-skin purses and cicar-cases, pen knives, books, toys, everything that the mind of man, in all its stages, can desire. From time to time she fixes on another candle, or hangs another swinging prize on the tree; and as she does so she is humming to herself "*Mädele ruck, ruck, ruck,*" with great contentment, just as if she had had nothing to do with the conspiracy which has tricked and discomfited six honest British householders.

V.

A SEQUEL TO THAT.

CHAPTER FIRST AND LAST.

THERE are evenings, it has been hinted in these pages, when we who live on the silent banks of the Mole, become a little tired of the pastoral seclusion of Surrey. Memories of other scenes and other days, rich with romantic incidents and gay with the brilliant colouring of change and movement, creep in upon us, and make us unwilling listeners to those old and familiar songs which our neighbours' wives sing for us night after night with an amiable but agonizing persistence. A glooms falls over the party. Some of us are thinking of wild nights in the northern seas, with the fishermen telling strange stories

of the lonely islands as they sit and wait for the first electric shimmer of white on the water that tells of a great shoal of herring. Others of us are thinking of many a pleasant evening in a Black Forest inn, with the keepers and drivers having their white wine and tobacco at a distant table, and with the horns of the slain deer being brought in to stand between the bottles of Affenthaler at a frugal but welcome supper. Others of us may wander back to the days in which we drove away through the summer greenness of our English counties, with the fresh winds blowing, and the white clouds sailing, until we beheld the mystic lights of Edinburgh Castle rising black in the moonlight, with a glow of orange fire in the dusky streets beneath. These are pictures not to be forgotten, however distant and strange they may seem now.

Well, in these circumstances, when a certain absence of interest, not to say languor and sad-

ness, is stealing over us, there are but two things which can wake up the party. First of all, if the young lady who has been called B. in the preceding pages happens to be present—and she is very often present, for we claim her as our own, although she went and married a Prussian —we send her to the piano. We have no more metaphysical sobbings then, or cries of young women after distant doves. A breath of the North Country breezes comes blowing through the room; the very children seem as if they would fain buckle on a claymore, and go out to fight somebody or something when B. begins to sing:—

"The standard on the braes o' Mar
Is up and streaming rarely!
The gathering pipe on Lochnagar
Is sounding lang and clearly!
The Highland men, from hill and glen,
In martial hue, wi' bonnets blue,
Wi' belted plaids, and burnished blades,
Are coming late and early!"

And then she has them crying with "The Flowers of the Forest" and the next minute laughing with "Come lasses and lads." The young person has a bad time of it when she sits down to the piano. She could not be harder worked if she advertised her entertainment daily at three and eight; prices of admission as much as you please; carriages to be ordered at five and half-past ten.

Another way of getting us out of our coma has, however, been in use for a long time back, and never fails. It is to recall the scene that occurred on a certain Christmas evening, and that marked the collapse and disappearance of our Billiard Club. The very children—chits of things who ought to be in bed—have been taught to scream with laughter when that wretched old story is repeated just as if there was no such thing as parental authority, or a birch rod, in existence.

"Oh, Aunty Bell," the brats cry, "tell us about the Major and his merry men."

That is what we have come to. We are only merry men in the eyes of our own offspring. And no sooner has the topic been started, than every-one must contribute his quota of shameful and outrageous exaggeration, while a lady—height, five feet three, eyes dark and apparently innocent, back hair enormous, temper impossible to describe—sits very demure and silent, without the least trace of a smile on her face.

Indeed, it was a humiliating evening, and yet there was an odd sort of satisfaction underlying our ignoble surrender, borrowed, perhaps from the hope of better things to come. First of all there was the mustering of the women and children; and such a party had never been seen in the house before—for here were nearly half a dozen families congregated together to eat their Christmas dinner. Queen Tita went flying up

and down, here and there, this way and that, like a flash of lightning with a white rose on its forehead—if the simile is permissible—while our gentle B. was the overseer of the young folks, who had all to be put in their places in plenty of time. Then the five wives got seated, too—all looking as proud as if they had just won the battle of Waterloo, or shaken hands with a Bishop. The present writer, by universal consent was graciously permitted to take the head of his own table; and then we awaited, with calm complacency, the arrival of the five gentlemen — each of them a villain and a traitor to a noble cause—whose seats were vacant.

Now the first to arrive was the Major himself, who ought to have been receiving his guests in his own house; and a more despicable, nervous, confused, and wretched man never entered a room. For a minute or so, he fancied there were

only the women and children there, whom he had expected to find assembled.

"My dear Madam," said he to Queen Tita, "this is really a most dreadful thing you have asked me to do. My friends will never forgive me —dear me, dear me, what a party of young folks we have! Well, to tell you the truth, the pleasure of carving for a number of young people— it was too much for me—I hope your husband— eh?—what!—good gracious me! Is it possible?——"

He was staring at the head of the table.

"Oh, Major," said Tita, with a great sweetness, "you see my husband has given up your bachelor dinner; just to keep you company, you know. Really, it is most kind of you to have taken pity on us. What should we have done without you?"

"Bless me!—indeed—really—bless me!" said the Major, stumbling into the nearest chair, and doubtless wishing that all the women and

children would not stare at him so. They, to be sure, were most grave and decorous; but how could they help staring?

The door opens. We behold the figure of a tall young man, heavily-bearded, sun-browned, blue-eyed. In 1866 this young man rode from Berlin to Nikolsburg; in 1870–1 he rode from Berlin to Versailles; perhaps that is why his features are so brown. And yet it seems to us, as he pauses irresolutely there, that we have never seen so deep a colour on his face; and the fashion in which he opens his eyes makes them appear to be of a lighter blue than ever.

"Are you afraid?" says B. to him: an odd question to put to a warrior, even although he is her own husband.

The next thing the young man does is to fix his eyes on the confused and abashed Major, and then to burst into a roar of laughter.

"O you very bad man!" he calls out, and the

Major seems to shrink further and further into his shoes; "you have left all your guests, yes? You have betrayed them, yes? Do you think of the terrible rage the Squire will be in—the billiards, that is nothing—but you ask a gentleman to dine at your house—you go away—he arrives and finds no one——"

"He will find a good dinner," says the Major, sulkily; "and I have left a note of explanation. I could not refuse——"

"You could not refuse? Yet you were not married, no: you were free. Why did you not refuse?"

"And pray," says B. to him, with great dignity, "who is there alive who dares to refuse what my Lady demands? I appeal to the children:—is there one of you bold enough, and rude enough, and wicked enough, to think of such a thing?"

"No, Aunty-Bell," was the general cry.

"Certainly not! Of course not! Don't let me

hear such a thing spoken of again, or there will be some big boys with beards on sent to bed directly."

"Please may I sit down?" says the warrior, meekly; and therewith he takes a chair opposite the Major.

What wild confusion is this in the hall? Has some lunatic asylum broken loose and come to besiege us? There is a sound of frantic expostulation, of scornful laughter, of stamping of feet, and presently the door is opened, and our three remaining guests appear at once, headed by the Squire, whose face is of a furious colour.

"Now, now," he says, in tones of indignant remonstrance, "it is too bad, upon my word!—it is really too bad, a trick of this sort. What was the need of it? We didn't want to dine by ourselves—not a bit of it—only you womenfolks would have it, you know, and so we let you have your own way. But to break up the

arrangement in this mean way—well now, it was too bad; and I know who did it—oh yes, I know who did it—and as for the Major there, why, sir, what the ——"

He recollects himself in time, and stops; but he is sulky, indignant, and on the whole disposed to challenge us men to go off and partake of the Major's dinner. But what is this? By some preconcerted signal all the children stand up, a chord is struck on the piano which has been dragged out into the hall, and suddenly the whole of them begin to sing—led by the clear and sweet voice of our B., who is at the piano—the familiar strains of "Auld Lang Syne." The recusants look rather dumbfoundered. "Should auld acquaintance be forgot?" is not a very appropriate grace before meat; but when the children had ceased their singing, when they had given a ringing cheer of welcome at the end of it, when the big soup-tureen became visible in

the hall, it was remarkable with what ease and thankfulness everyone sate down to the table. There was not a vacant chair. And when, amid all the laughing and talking that ensued, the Squire's eldest daughter, a pert young miss of thirteen, graciously desired to have the pleasure of drinking a glass of wine with her papa, even he was mollified, and gave himself up thereafter to all the careless gaiety of the evening.

Late that night, when all the children had gone to bed, and just as the last of the guests had driven away from the door, two solitary figures, pretty well muffled up, might have been observed to steal out into the darkness. Yet it was not very dark; for there was a clear sky overhead, throbbing with its innumerable points of white fire, and there was a slight crisp coating of snow on the path, on the lawn, and on the bushes. The sound of the wheels died away in the distance. There was no breath of

wind to stir the laurel-leaves or the branches of the firs. All around nothing but silence and sleep; and overhead the strange abounding life of the stars.

"Do you remember," says one of these two, "a night like this, at Eastbourne, a great many years ago, when a girl stole out after all the house was in darkness, merely to say one word in reply to a letter she had got? Do you remember how cold the wind was—and how she was told that her face was burning all the same —and how she stole in again, and went upstairs, and threw a flower over the window, that fell on the white pavement, and was immediately picked up? And how some one, who had been of opinion that the notion of going to Eastbourne at that time of the year was absolute madness, declared next day that it was the most beautiful place in all the world in December? Do you remember all these things?"

"Yes; and more," is the reply, "I can remember that I knew at that time a tender-hearted young thing who went about nursing the most beautiful idealisms about wifely obedience and duties, and all she would try to be to her husband in the days to come. That young woman—well, it is a great many years ago, to be sure,—vowed that she would honour and respect her husband above all men; that the small world of her acquaintance would have cause to wonder over her faith and devotion. But times change. We forget these simple aspirations of our youth. What if you found that same tender-hearted thing not ashamed to bring contumely and disgrace upon her husband—to deceive his friends and make them and him a by-word—all about a paltry billiard-table?"

"Oh, bother your billiard-table!" says this impatient person, forgetting how near she was to the Mole, and how that a mere child could

have lifted her up by the waist and dropped her in.

And then—suddenly altering her tone and demeanour, which she can do in a second, when it suits her purpose—she says, with a great shyness and sweetness:—

"After all, shall I tell you a secret? You were speaking of young wives—well, there is nothing they won't do to please their husbands. And now our B. has been round to us all, pleading so earnestly to let you men have one evening's billiards in the week that we have all consented. And we are all coming to look on, just to prevent gambling and the use of wicked language, you know. And we propose to have it on Saturday evening, so that you won't be tempted to play after twelve."

"Indeed! Have you provided hobby-horses for us, Madam? Would it please you to have clean blouses and pinafores sent up to the billiard-

room, that we may not chalk our clothes? Shall we be rewarded with a silver threepenny-piece if we sing a hymn prettily? Gadzooks, Madam, are we babes and sucklings to be treated in this manner?"

"You needn't swear," says the small person, calmly, "especially on such a night as this. Shall we go up to Mickleham Downs?"

An aerolite star fell athwart the sky, and for a moment left a line of light in its wake. Looking at that, and at the wonderful expanse all throbbing with stars, we somehow forgot the fierce fight that had recently raged in our small social circle. We walked on, through the white and silent world, with that other and living world looking down on it with a million sad and distant eyes; and after the storm there was peace.

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